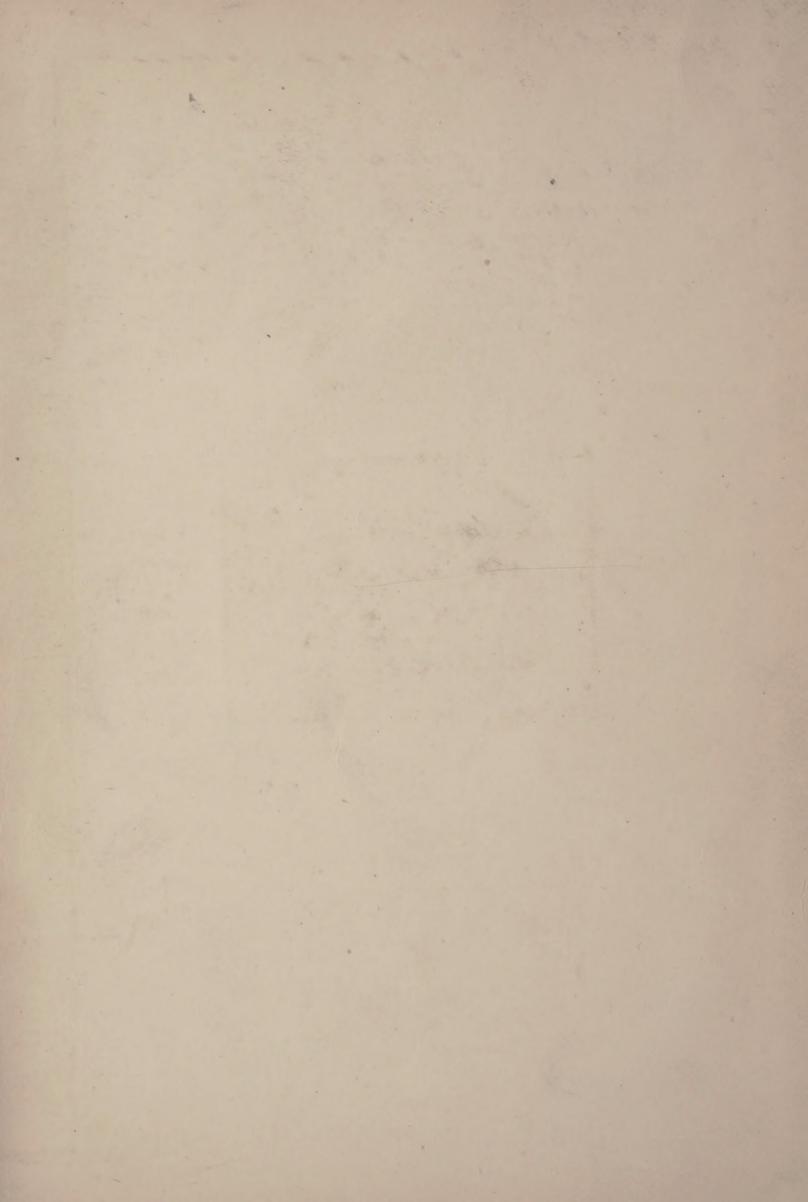
SMUGGLERS OFCHESTNUT-

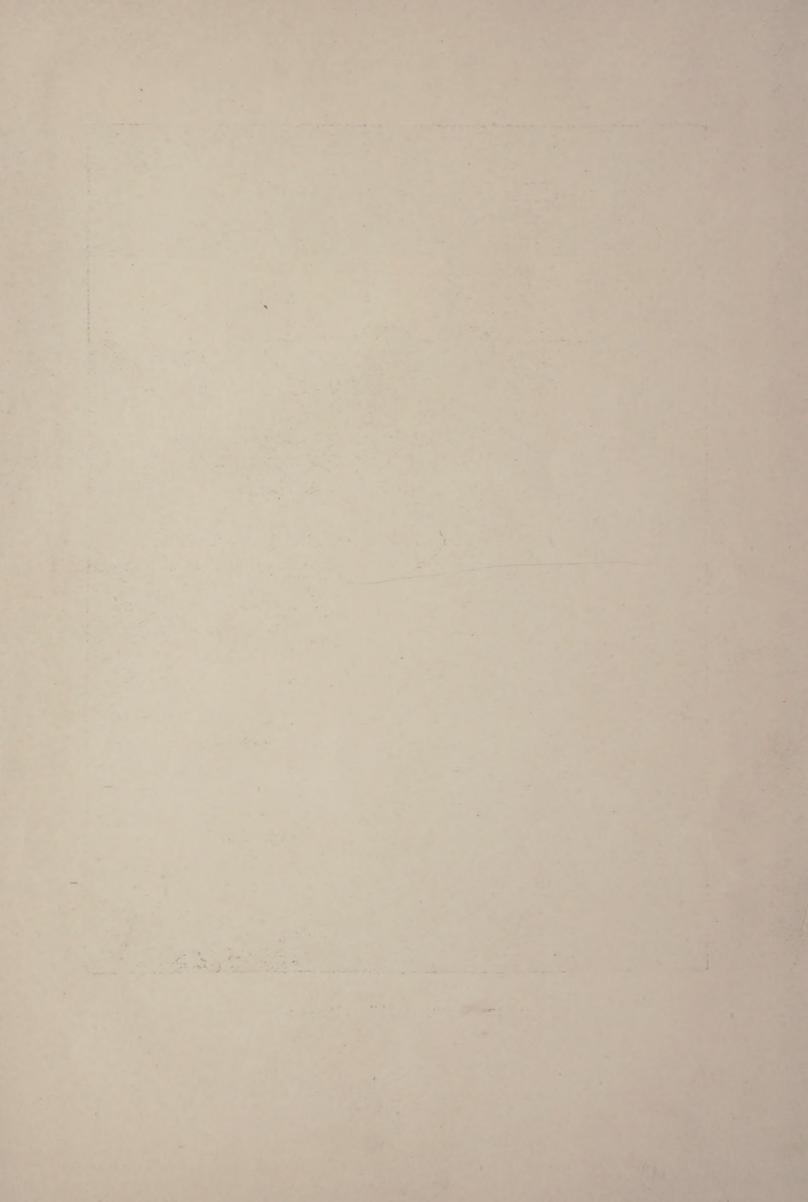
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

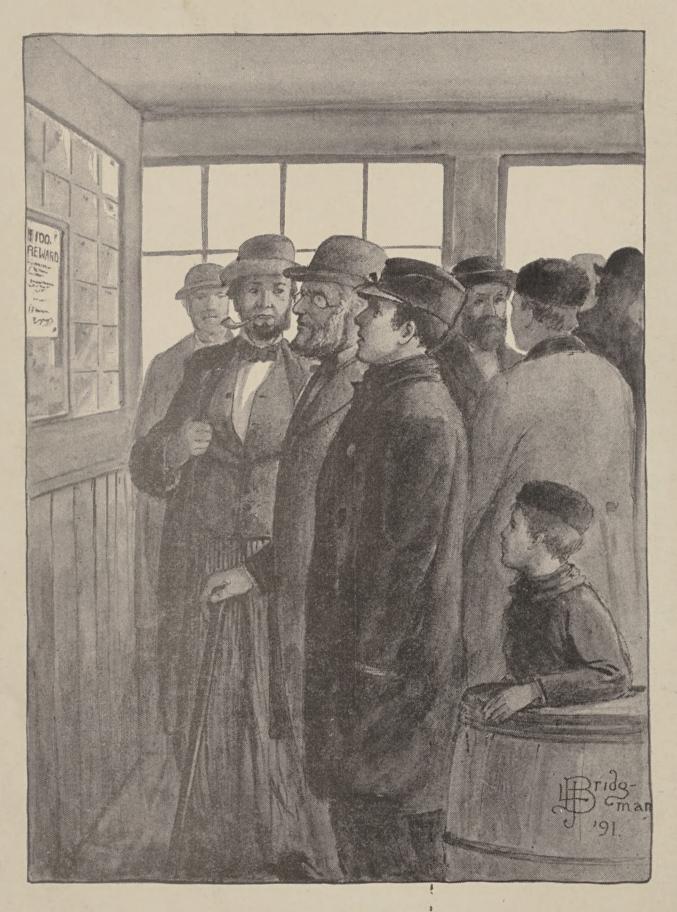
Shelf PZ3

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.









"\$100 REWARD!!" (Page 182)

[1.1].

THE

SMUGGLERS OF CHESTNUT

BY

CLARENCE B. BURLEIGH

With Illustrations

AUGUSTA MAINE

E. E. KNOWLES AND COMPANY

1891

2 3 x

Copyright, 1891, By C. B. BURLEIGH

All rights reserved.

то

MY BROTHER,

LEWIS A. BURLEIGH,

This Book

IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED.

PREFACE.

It has been the aim of the writer to present, in the hero of this volume, not only a live boy, but a *real* boy.

This could not possibly be done were he to depict him as a perfect boy. Such boys exist only in the grotesque idealism of certain professedly "helpful" juvenile works in which young angelic figures move through a sort of celestial atmosphere to continuous works of goodness, and are burdened with none of the faults that the frail everyday children of the human race are forced to contend with. It is a fact that these truly good books are rapidly becoming reminiscences, for, strange as it may seem, real live boys and girls will not and can not bring themselves into sympathy with seraphic personages, whose counterparts they have never met with in their own little world.

Often, indeed, have young people blindly sought relief, from such books, in literature of the dime novel stamp, preferring its wicked, worldly, unnaturally precocious heroes and heroines to the uncongenial cherubim, which well meaning, but mistaken elders had selected for their literary playmates.

It is certainly a hopeful sign of the times that for some years past our Sunday school libraries have been discarding literature that, with all its goodness, has not power to touch a single sympathetic, responsive chord in the hearts of the young people for whose advantage it was benevolently evolved, but the formation of whose characters it has been conspicuously impotent to influence.

There is probably nothing in the world that a live boy or girl more heartily detests than a lecture on ethics, and when such lectures are illustrated by cold wax figures, that bear no resemblance to anything childhood ever saw, the torture becomes simply unendurable.

It is not a difficult thing for successful educators to incultate good morals in young people, for they are wise enough to sugar-coat their ethical pellets with life and interest; to give them something of natural warmth.

The writer has endeavored to impart to Raymond Benson such a human interest as shall insure him fellowship with those who may make his acquaintance. He has aimed to make him a truthful, a fearless, a manly boy who, with all his faults, will exert a healthful influence upon those who may know him—in short has endeavored to make him the central figure of a volume in which readers may find not only something to enlist their interest, but also a stimulus to do what is honorable and right.

It is his earnest hope that the book may serve, in some degree, the purpose for which it was written.

AUGUSTA, ME., JUNE 26, 1891.

CONTENTS.

	CHAPTER I.							PAGI
Trouble at the Chestnut	High School	٠	,					
	CHAPTER II.							
The Spirit of Mischief								28
sensi.								
	CHAPTER III.							
Tom Atkins Takes a Tu	mble							42
	CHAPTER IV.							
Joel Webber's Close Cal	11	٠	۰			0	c	56
	CHAPTER V.							
An Evening at Squire C	opeland's Sto	re		0	o	•		70
	CHAPTER VI.							
Raymond Shoots Pete A	tkins's Dog		G.	*				83
							-	

CHAPTER VII PAGE 96 CHAPTER VIII. CHAPTER IX. CHAPTER X. The Burning of Grandfather Benson's Barn 143 CHAPTER XI. CHAPTER XII. CHAPTER XIII. CHAPTER XIV. Raymond and Ned Do Detective Work . . .

	_		
d	A	١	
3	4	ĭ	
8	и		

CONTENTS.

	CHAPTER XV.				
D 1: M 1 D					PAGE
Raymond is Made a Pri	isoner		•		225
	CHAPTER XVI.				
The Tables Turned					240
	CHAPTER XVII.				
Ned Has Some Stirring	Experiences .				257
	CHAPTER XVIII.				
Ned Becomes Acquaint	ed with the Scoop				267
	CHAPTER XIX.				
Pete Atkins in the Toil	s				278
	CHAPTER XX.				
Joel Webber is Given a	a Surprise				287
	1				
	CHAPTER XXI.				
Conclusion					298
Conclusion		1		0	200

A THE REAL PROPERTY AND ADDRESS OF THE PARTY A

THE SMUGGLERS OF CHESTNUT.

CHAPTER I.

TROUBLE AT THE CHESTNUT HIGH SCHOOL.

"WILL you hold up your head, Raymond Benson, and attend to the recitation, or shall I try the virtue of this?"

It was Mr. David Beecham, the teacher of the Free High School at Chestnut Corner, who thus delivered himself. As he spoke he waved the tough ash pointer which he held in his hand towards a square-shouldered, compactly built boy who sat upon the front seat with his elbows upon his knees and his face buried in his hands, apparently oblivious of the recitation in history that had been going on about him. Even the sharp, imperative tones of the teacher did not fully arouse him to his surroundings. He was conscious that his name had been spoken, but so absorbed had he seemingly been in his reflections that he had not understood the remark addressed to him. Slowly raising his head, he cast a bewildered look about the room and inquired in an uncertain voice:

"What, sir?"

"Will you pay some attention to this recitation, or shall I try the virtue of this?"

"That pointer?"

"Yes, sir, this pointer. I mean just what I say. Either you will know what is going on in the class, or know the virtue of this. Now which do you purpose to do?"

"Neither." There was a ring of defiance in the voice. It was evident to the excited pupils, who had dropped their books and were watching the scene with amazed faces, that Raymond Benson was thoroughly angry. His mouth was rigid and set, and there was a determined look in his eye.

His reply had been so wholly unexpected that David Beecham was quite as much astonished at it as were his pupils.

"Do you intend to defy me?" he gasped.

"I intend to accept neither of the alternatives you have proposed to me."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Just what I say."

Mr. Beecham grasped the pointer in his hand more firmly and took a step toward Raymond, then stopped irresolutely. The outlook did not please him. He was but little stronger physically than the boy who faced him so defiantly. He saw, too, by the heavy ruler which Raymond had taken from the window sill and was holding tightly in his hand, that he would not be subdued without a struggle. Mr. Beecham did not relish the prospect of a fight. He was not a belligerent man. Besides, he had a special incentive to peace in this instance in the fact that Dave Weston, a cousin of Raymond's, and one of the largest boys in school, had risen from his seat and stood half way down the aisle, closely watching the progress of affairs, with an evident purpose to take a hand in them, should they come to blows. Under the circumstances Mr. Beecham concluded that diplomacy was preferable to war.

"I did not expect this of you, Raymond," he said with unconcealed emotion. "What is the meaning of it?"

"It means just this; I have had a bad headache all day. You must have seen that both times when you spoke to me before. I haven't wanted any trouble. I don't intend to have any. When it comes to that I will take my books and leave school. It is best, now, perhaps, that I should go anyway. I will not trouble you further, but I certainly shall not submit to a whipping from you or any other man while I am able to resist him."

"If your head ached, why didn't you tell me of it?"

"I thought you could see it for yourself."

"Unfortunately I could not."

"Well, I'm not to blame for that."

Mr. Beecham made no reply, but turning abruptly and going to his desk, he rang the bell for recess. When it was over, Raymond Benson was no longer a member of the school. He had taken his books and gone to the village proper, which was nearly half a mile below the school house.

Chestnut Corner was not very much of a metropolis. As its name indicates, it was situated at the crossing of two roads. One of these was the old county road which connected the Corner, and the rest of Aroostook County, with the prosperous city of Bangor, seventy miles to the southwest, and thence with the great outside world beyond. In former years this road had been the main thoroughfare for all the traffic of the county. Over it daily ran a line of large stage coaches, each drawn by four or six horses. These were almost invariably loaded to their utmost capacity. In addi-

tion to the stage coaches, there was a daily succession of heavy "tote" teams, hauling the products of Aroostook to a market at Bangor and bringing back with them all the articles of merchandise required for the county trade. Those were halcyon days for Chestnut Corner, if one could accept the concurrent testimony of its older inhabitants. The arrival of the stage was always an event looked forward to with each recurring day. Its interest never waned, and in sunshine or storm the lumbering coach was sure to find an eager group awaiting it when it drew up at the Corner post office. Here was the focus of interest in the little village; here, while the mail was being distributed, the good towns-people met to exchange choice bits of neighborhood gossip. No local newspaper, had the Corner boasted one, could possibly have dished up the local happenings half so exhaustively. It must not be inferred, however, that the Corner gossips were at all exceptional. Was there ever a country town without them? Indeed, would anyone with well developed social qualities desire to live in a rural community that did not possess them? Most of the people who from time to time congregated at the Corner post office were whole-souled and generous-hearted. Their desire to know about their neighbors was almost wholly due to a kindly interest in them. A townsman had only to meet with misfortune to have a very convincing proof of this. The ministrations of his neighbors took a practical form. His wood-pile was never allowed to diminish, nor was his larder permitted to become empty. Notwithstanding all this, there were people at Chestnut Corner—as there are at all country corners,—who were accustomed to declare that it had a greater number of gossips in proportion to its total population than any other place in the country. They would usually accompany this statement with a little list of the most inveterate gossips, and then, branching off into more general lines, would, ten chances to one, finally bring up with a careful review of the available young ladies of the town and the "fellers" who were going with them, together with sage predictions as to the chances for matrimony in each case. They were quite as often at the post office at stage time as were the "gossips" whose prying interest in the affairs of their neighbors they so deeply deplored.

The heavy "tote" teams that had formerly traversed the county road had also been a most important feature in the daily affairs of the Corner. They frequently hauled up at Cobe Hersom's blacksmith shop to have horses shod or repairing done, and their drivers were always surrounded by a group of eager questioners who found a never failing source of interest in the budget of news which they had collected all along the line. Many an errand these teamsters did for the people along their route, and in return were seldom obliged to pay for meals and lodgings. Those were certainly lively times for the Corner, and it was not strange that the older men, who still found a rendezvous at Squire Copeland's store, which, as in days of yore, continued to bear the post office sign, and at Cobe Hersom's shop, where the proprietor still did business on a somewhat smaller scale, loved dearly to enlarge upon their glories.

The advent of the railroad at Bolton, eight miles from the Corner, had given the death blow to stage coaches and "tote" teams. Now the only thing that the Corner could boast in the shape of a stage was a beach wagon during the summer months, and an old pung in winter, which daily carried the mails to and from Bolton. Many who had never anticipated

any other mode of travel than staging were heavy losers by the decline of staging. Others there were who had foreseen such a result and had shrewdly disposed of their stage property. Among the latter was Andrew Benson, who had once been sole proprietor of the line of stage coaches which passed through the Corner on the road between Bolton and Bangor. In addition to this, he had owned a majority of the heavy "tote" teams which traversed the same road. Foreseeing the decline of staging, he had sold his line and invested the proceeds in a beautiful farm about three miles below Chestnut Corner. His "tote" teams had been utilized in lumber operations.

At this time the large family which Mr. Benson had brought up were grown men and women with homes of their own. Among them was Henry Benson, who, by industry and economy, had been able to establish a large commission business in Bangor and to accumulate a handsome property. Henry had two children; Clara, a quiet, sweet-faced girl of fourteen, and Raymond, three years older, to whom the reader has already been introduced under somewhat embarrassing circumstances.

City life had not been a good atmosphere for Raymond Benson. His superabundant energy and love of excitement had led him to select companions who were far from his parents' liking. They had frequently discussed their boy's future with much anxiety, and had finally decided that a year or two of country life would prove in every way beneficial to him. This decision was strengthened by a letter from father Benson in which, under an attempt to appear cheerful, was a pathetic reference to the loneliness that he and mother felt in the old home nest from which all the young birds had flown.

This letter decided Mr. Benson to send Raymond at once to the old homestead. He felt that what the boy most needed was some healthy employment. Idleness was sure to lead him into mischief. In the work of the farm he would find abundant outlet for his surplus vital force. The bracing country air would insure him physical vigor, and the schools at Chestnut Corner would afford him an excellent opportunity for the continuance of his studies. Thus, a week later, Raymond found himself domiciled under his grandfather's roof.

Grandfather Benson was a progressive man. He was always ready and anxious to learn of new and improved methods of cultivation, and it was largely due to this fact that his farm was among the most productive and profitable in the county. Because his father had been accustomed to certain methods of work, and he himself had subsequently followed them, it was no reason, he declared, why he should think those ways were necessarily the best, or why he should hesitate to discard them for what he believed to be better ones. He was not among the number of those who think that the world is degenerating. To him the era of progress was a living fact. He believed that, in his own world of action, he knew more about farming than his father had known, and he did not doubt that the succeeding generation would be far in advance of his own in everything that pertained to practical life.

He had seen Chestnut grow from a wilderness into one of the most prosperous towns in Aroostook County. More than half a century before, when only fifteen years of age, he had started in with his father to clear the place he then owned. They had built a small log camp upon the banks of the brook beside the spring, from which a hydraulic ram now forced a never-failing supply of pure water into a large tank beside the porch sink.

Those were days of hard work for Andrew Benson and his father. The ring of their busy axes was almost the only sound that broke the silence of the great primeval forest; but they brought to their labors rugged health and the hearty appetites acquired by wholesome work in the open air. As they lay in their bunks at night they frequently heard the howling of hungry wolves about the little clearing. Game was plentiful and formed a most important item in their daily bill of fare. The brook fairly swarmed with trout, and many a delicious meal they pulled from its waters.

In time a respectable clearing was made in the forest, and, with the assistance of one or two friends from other clearings, a good sized log house was erected near the camp. Here, the following spring, Mr. Benson brought the remainder of his family, a cheerful, industrious wife and two little girls. Then began a long, hard struggle for a livelihood. A number of other children were born, and it was often a puzzle to find the means for feeding all the hungry mouths that gathered at meal time about the rude board table. Often, indeed, it was found necessary to supplement the products of the farm with fish and game, of which, happily, there was almost always an abundance.

But fortune favored this hardy, God-fearing family. Sickness was almost unknown among its members. The children grew into rugged, earnest Christian men and women. Slowly but surely the wilderness was subdued and the Benson farm became one of the best in the county. The old log house, through whose large cracks the snow had often sifted in on stormy winter nights, to pile itself in little drifts about the beds of the boys in the loft, was replaced by the more modern building which was still the farm home.

It had seemed a veritable palace to the Bensons when they had first moved into it, so much more roomy and convenient was it than the home they had left with its small rooms roughly partitioned off with the cedar splits, which, in the pioneer days of Chestnut, before the advent of saw-mills, were made to answer the purpose of boards.

And yet there were tender memories and cherished associations clustering about the old home that made it very dear to all the family, and many bitter tears were shed when, a few years later, it was torn down to make room for the ell which was then added to the new house.

In time the children grew up and moved away—some of them to distant states. Andrew Benson alone, of all the number, continued to reside in Chestnut. He carried on the farm and made a comfortable home for his father and mother up to the time of their death. In return for this he was given the homestead. He continued to reside upon it until a large family of children were gathered about him. Then he sold the farm and purchased the old, rambling tavern at Chestnut Corner, together with the stage line between Bolton and Bangor. The years that followed were prosperous ones. All of Mr. Benson's children were earners, and the expenses of the family were watched over with frugal economy. The girls helped their mother in the household duties of the tavern-Corner people would have smiled to have heard it called a hotel,—and the boys drove stage and took care of the stable. With such thrift the family soon had quite a sum of money at profitable interest, to which they yearly made material accessions.

When the children finally started out in life for themselves each had accumulated by honest industry enough to be of considerable assistance to him, and still father Benson retained a very respectable bank account, in addition to his other property.

The habits of thrift and economy which the children had learned of their parents proved of great value to them in after years, and, at the time of which I write, all were accounted well-to-do, and several of them wealthy. Among the latter was Henry Benson, Raymond's father, who was justly considered one of the most prosperous and influential citizens of Bangor.

When the children had all left the old home, and their places in the work of the tavern were filled with hired help, the old building lost its charm for father and mother Benson. Then, too, the prosperous days of stage lines were on the wane. The railroads were supplanting them all over the country. This fact did not escape the attention of Mr. Benson, who was a liberal patron and close reader of the newspapers. He saw that some day even Aroostook county, as far removed from the great centers of trade and life as it then appeared to be, and fenced in by many miles of virgin forest, would be reached in the progressive march of the iron rails, His neighbors, to be sure, pooh-poohed the idea, but that did not change in the slightest his opinion upon the matter. He was a man who arrived at conclusions with cautious slowness, and when they were reached adhered to them with conservative tenacity.

In these days he found the love of the old home farm returning with all the power it had exerted upon him in younger years. He was homesick, he told his wife with a wistful smile, for the old place; and finally, when a good opportunity presented itself, he had purchased it, sold the tavern and stage line, and moved back once more under the roof of the old home, around which clustered so many tender memories of by-gone days. Here he kept open house for all the Benson family, and during the warm summer months it was seldom without a merry party of his grandchildren and their parents.

These visits to grandfather Benson's were highly enjoyable events to the grandchildren, and were looked forward to by them with an eagerness that was not unshared, if not always shown, by their parents.

When grandfather Benson found himself back once more on the old farm he had thrown himself into the work of improving it, with all the pride and energy he had bestowed upon it in younger years. It would have seemed to most men as if little remained to be done. The farm was in an excellent state of cultivation, and the buildings upon it were in thorough repair. Grandfather Penson, however, found many things to do. The meadow land about the brook was carefully under-drained and transformed into a magnificent hay field. The large orchard was thoroughly renovated. Old trees were grafted with scions of the finest varieties, and a large number of choice young trees were set out.

"If I do not gather the fruit of these," Mr. Benson had said with a smile to his wife, when she cautioned him against working so hard, "it will be pay enough for all my trouble just to see them grow." The good man, however, had already been enjoying the fruit of these trees for several years when Raymond came to him.

When the work in the orchard was completed, grandfather Benson began an innovation that filled his worthy neighbors with amazement, and was soon the talk of the town, forming the subject of many an earnest discussion around the big stove in Squire Copeland's corner store. To be sure, the matter might not have appeared of great importance to the world at large, but in Chestnut events that were not of special moment in themselves sometimes assumed unexpected interest from So with Andrew Benson's improvements their surroundings. upon the old farm. The worthy townspeople had declared it all folly for a man of his years and property to work so incessantly. The great influence that he had always exerted in town matters gave his affairs unusual interest to Chestnut citizens. His "new-fangled notions" were always a fruitful theme of discussion at the sewing circles and the post office. But everyone agreed that grandfather Benson's latest eccentricity exceeded anything in that line of which he had before been guilty. It was nothing less than the clearing up of the unsightly rubbish by the roadside in front of his farm, and the planting of a row of apple trees along the whole length of the narrow strip of land thus reclaimed. Chestnut people could appreciate the clearing up of the rubbish, and voted it an idea in every way worthy of emulation; but they were unable to conceive of any sufficient reason for the apple trees. It certainly seemed to them a very strange thing, when the most unceasing vigilance was necessary every fall to keep the apple thieves out of the orchards of the town, to see a man planting fruit trees beside the road where their product would be within reach of every passer by.

"I hope you don't expect to get any apples from those trees," Mr. Grover had said, as he came one day upon grand-father Benson busily engaged in setting out the last of them.

[&]quot;Why not?" was the response.

[&]quot;Because they will be stolen."

"I don't believe they will be. Doubtless a few will be taken, but I sha'n't object to that. If any man who is going by here in the fall when these trees are bearing wants an apple or two, I shall be perfectly willing to let him have them. After all such people are satisfied, I think there will still be quite a number of apples left for me to gather."

"I'm blest if I believe it, Andrew," said Mr. Grover, with an incredulous shake of his head. "I've had some experience with apple thieves and I don't feel any too sure. Why, I had to keep a constant watch over my orchard last fall. If I hadn't, I really don't believe I should have gathered any apples at all. As it was, I lost a number of bushels; that was back from the road, too. These trees you have planted here will have no protection whatever. Everybody will have an opportunity to help themselves."

"Well, one thing is certain," responded Mr. Benson with a smile. "If they get what they want here, they won't go into my orchard for apples, so that, after all, by your own admission, I shall be better off than you are."

"Yes, if you're willing to throw away all your hard work and have these trees count you nothing."

"But they will count me something, won't they, if they protect my orchard, and save me the trouble of watching it?"

"Yes, but nothing compared with the value of the apples you will lose. Just as long as no fruit, to amount to anything, is raised in the upper part of the county, there will always be an inducement for thieves to raid our orchards. I shall be glad when the people up north get orchards of their own. Then there will be no demand there for fruit to stimulate our own and other rascals to steal it from our orchards."

"Do you think some of those fellows live here in Chestnut?"

"I haven't the slightest doubt of it. In fact, I feel morally sure who some of them are. It would be a very difficult, if not an impossible thing, though, to prove it to a legal certainty. We must wait for the growth of orchards up north before we can really expect to be let alone by such knaves."

"Yes, but when that thing comes about we shall have lost our fine market for fruit," responded Mr. Benson. "You see it counts about six on one side and half a dozen on the other. I don't fear anything of the kind, though. In my opinion neither the soil nor the climate of upper Aroostook is suited to fruit raising."

"There's something in that," admitted Mr. Grover, "though I confess I've never looked at the matter in that light before. It may have been a way Nature had of sort of evening up her bounties between us and the people up north."

"Perhaps so," was the smiling response. "Now I'll tell you just how I happened to plant these apple trees here. I think you'll agree with me that it isn't such a foolish notion at some of my neighbors have imagined. I had intended at first to set out maples, but it occurred to me that I could get varieties of apple trees that would look about as well and have the added advantage of usefulness. If all the apples are taken I shall be just as well off as I would have been if I had planted maples. If I get any fruit from them, it will be clear gain, for it's no more work to set them out than it would be to set out the maples, and there isn't much difference in the cost of getting them."

"I don't know but what you are right, Andrew," conceded Mr. Grover. "You have a way of looking clean 'round a thing where some of us can only see it from one side," and he continued on his way home, a convert to the innovation.

But grandfather Benson did not cease his improvements upon the old place with the changes on the road front. He built a fence about the whole farm that was the admiration of all who saw it, and that soon became known far and near as the finest in the county. It was built of whole cedar logs, of which there was an abundance upon the farm. The bottom log rested upon a granite underpinning. The fence was six rails high, the top rail along the road front being securely bolted on. This was a precautionary measure and grew out of grandfather Benson's observation of the fact that rail fences were chiefly endangered by the practice of teamsters in taking off fence rails for use as levers in the drifts of winter and the mire of early spring. Broad as was grandfather Benson's philanthropy, it was not sufficient for the sacrifice of that new fence to the needs of Chestnut teamsters.

These were only a few of the improvements that grand-father Benson made upon the old place after his return to it, and he still had many others in view when Raymond came to him. The boy entered with enthusiasm into all his plans. In fact, he found his life on the old place far pleasanter than he had anticipated. His grandparents were devotedly attached to him, and did everything in their power to make him happy and contented. There was also an interest for him in the farm work, for grandfather Benson knew exactly how to awaken it. He had made Raymond a confidant, advising with him about the crops and the care of the stock, and readily accepting his suggestions when they were good ones. Raymond was given three late calves which Mr. Benson intended to kill, a colt, four lambs, and two dozen

hens, and he was thus imbued with that personal pride and interest in the creatures about him that comes from a sense of proprietorship. Then, too, he had an acre of land all for his own, the products of which he was permitted to dispose of as he pleased. This he planted to potatoes, the great money crop in Aroostook. He had labored diligently all through the spring and summer, grandfather Benson frequently declaring that he would not want a better boy to work. When fall came he dug his potatoes, securing a yield of one hundred and fifty bushels, which he sold at the starch factories and at the Bolton market, clearing the snug little sum of sixty dollars.

It was the second week in October that the Free High School at Chestnut Corner began. Raymond, who had grown a little weary of the monotony of farm life, had looked forward to this event with considerable interest. I will explain here for the benefit of any of my readers who may not understand the term, that free high schools are carried on in Maine under special statute laws. These provide that any town which establishes and maintains such a school not less than ten weeks in the year shall receive from the state one half the amount actually expended for instruction, provided that it does not exceed two hundred and fifty dollars, and that the town's appropriation has been exclusive of the amount required by law for common school purposes. The money required by the state law for the school at Chestnut Corner had been raised by private subscription. The list had been headed by grandfather Benson, who, on Raymond's account, had made himself the prime mover in the project. After considerable canvassing the necessary amount had been secured, and David Beecham, a State College

student, who had taught the district school the previous winter with flattering success, was engaged as instructor.

It had been quite a problem for Raymond how he should get to and from the Corner in attending the school. This was soon satisfactorily settled. Ned Grover, who lived on the adjoining farm, was also going to attend the school, and boasted among his possessions a spirited four-year-old colt. This, with an old harness and buggy of grandfather Benson's, provided the boys with as fine a team as they could possibly have desired. What beautiful drives they had enjoyed through the crisp autumn air! And how familiar had grown their clear, merry voices to the people who lived along the road!

CHAPTER II.

THE SPIRIT OF MISCHIEF.

Although David Beecham had been successful as a district school teacher, he soon found that a free high school was quite a different thing. It was much larger; then, too, its pupils were older and were drawn from all parts of the town. As he made out his register Mr. Beecham told himself that he had never before in his life undertaken a task of such magnitude as the teaching of the Corner High School.

For a week or two matters went along smoothly enough. Then the trouble began. A spirit of mischief and unrest appeared to pervade the whole school. Even some of those who had been among Mr. Beecham's most staid and steadygoing pupils at the district school seemed completely dominated by its influence. Mr. Beecham was utterly bewildered by it, and one day when slow-going, studious Roscoe Bean, who had never before been known to do anything amiss, suddenly bounded from the front seat, in the midst of a geometry recitation, threw his book upon the floor, and gave vent to a war-whoop that would have done credit to a Comanche, the teacher was thoroughly perplexed. In response to his inquiry, "Why, what is the matter, Mr. Bean?" Roscoe had answered, "Nothing, much," but at the same time he cast a look that was anything but pleasant at Raymond Benson, who

sat behind him apparently absorbed in his history lesson. Mr. Beecham forebore to question him further, but he was fully convinced that Roscoe knew more than he was willing to tell. Could the teacher have looked under the seat, he would have seen sticking from the toe of Raymond Benson's boot a sharply pointed tooth-pick. This it was which, when inserted through the slats of the front seat, had exercised such a startling influence upon Roscoe Bean.

"Ross, you were a brick not to tell on me," said Raymond to his victim at recess.

"Well, if you ever do anything of the kind again I shall tell, and more than that, I'll give you a whaling you won't forget right away."

"I'm terribly sorry about that, old man. I didn't intend to hurt you so," and there was such a world of sympathy in Raymond's tones that Roscoe was instantly mollified.

"It's all right this time," he said, "but don't let it occur again. I shouldn't be responsible for what would follow."

That noon the bell was missing, and it took considerable vocal exercise on the part of Mr. Beecham to call the school to order. It was three days before the missing bell re-appeared upon the teacher's desk as suddenly and mysteriously as it had vanished, but, in the meantime, Mr. Beecham had settled in his own mind the identity of the magician. He felt that Raymond Benson was at the bottom of pretty much all the mischief that was going on. He concluded not to say anything for the present, but to keep a closer watch over his actions. He did not wish any trouble with the boy whose cordial manners, sunny disposition and exuberant life made him a prime favorite with all his associates. Raymond was also a fearless boy, with an active mind, fertile in resources, whether for

mischief or play. He was a born leader, and Mr. Beecham fully appreciated the importance of keeping on the good side of him. Moreover, he felt under peculiar obligations to grandfather Benson, and was loath to take any step that might strain their pleasant relations.

Matters grew worse, instead of better, however. Raymond Benson and Ned Grover had been playing a little practical joke upon their fellow students for a day or two. It seemed to them very humorous, and they appeared to extract considerable merriment out of the surprise and discomfiture of their victims. The plan of operation was for one to engage the victim in conversation while the other crept up and took a position on his hands and knees just behind him. A sharp push from the boy in front seldom failed to send the unsuspicious subject of the experiment flat upon his back with startling celerity. It was a dangerous and foolish pastime, but the victims generally took it good-naturedly, and were always on hand to witness the grand tumble of the next one to fall into the trap.

Veneration was not a strong trait with Raymond Benson, who as my readers have doubtless discovered, had many serious faults. Near the school lived a crabbed old fellow named Ezra Johnston, whose large orchard some of the boys had been in the habit of visiting occasionally. One day the old man discovered Harry Oakley and Sam Brown, two of the High School boys, coming from the direction of his apple trees, and assuming that they had been stealing his fruit he followed them into the school yard.

"See here, you young rascals, what do you mean by stealing my apples?" he demanded.

"Whom were you speaking to?" inquired Brown with apparent surprise.

"You needn't try to look so innocent. I saw you coming from my orchard just now. I'm going to give you your choice of two things. Either you will pay for the apples I've lost, or I'll—blazes!"

As this last startled remark slipped from the old man's mouth his heels flew in the air and he measured his length upon the ground, impelled by a sharp push from Brown over the back of Raymond Benson, who had crept up behind him during the progress of the conversation. Before he could regain his feet the boys had disappeared in the school house, in answer to the bell, leaving him to rub his shins and swear vengeance.

These were but a small part of the pranks in which Raymond Benson was continually engaging. The spirit of mischief in him appeared to be contagious. It pervaded the whole school.

A very disturbing element consisted of several young men who, although they were too old to engage personally in the petty mischief so annoying to the teacher, were not above urging the smaller boys on by an apparent approval of their pranks. Among these young men was Dave Weston, the cousin of Raymond, who has already been referred to in the preceding chapter. Dave was twenty years of age and although he was personally attentive to his studies, and gave Mr. Beecham no cause to complain of his conduct in the school room, yet, in a quiet way, he had contrived to make him a great deal of trouble. Dave had been known a few years before as the worst boy in the Corner High School, and finally, after having several disgraceful knock-down encounters with his teachers, had been expelled from school by the

This rough, but wholesome lesson sobered him committee. He began to realize the shame and folly of his somewhat. course and to see that school was the place where he should strive to lay the foundations for future success in life. For several terms after this he attended the academy at Bolton. Here he had an opportunity to meet and know young men who were ambitious for the future, and earnestly devoting their most zealous efforts to prepare themselves for its duties. Such associations were of great benefit to Dave. They stimulated his love of study; they developed his manhood and broadened his views of life. He became anxious to secure a good education, and desirous of taking some worthy position in the world. For the first time he devoted himself to his books with a genuine determination to master them, and was astonished at his own rapid progress.

But though there had been a great change for the better in Dave, he still had many things to learn. There still remained many important lessons in true manliness of character for him to master. When the Free High School at the Corner opened, he had sought, and obtained from the committee, on promise of good behavior, permission to attend it. That promise had been kept in form, but not in spirit. So far as his personal conduct in the school room was concerned, Mr. Beecham never had reason to complain. He was studious and respectful; but outside of school hours he succeeded in setting on foot no little mischief among the smaller boys, who entertained a profound respect for his opinions.

Upon Raymond, especially, had Dave exerted an unwhole-some influence by privately commending him for acts of mischief which he should have been manly enough to condemn. In short, he was a most pernicious factor in the unrest and

foolish pranks which were so seriously interfering with the usefulness of the school.

"I tell you there doesn't begin to be the pluck and backbone in this school that there was a few years ago," he remarked to a crowd of the younger boys as they sat upon the steps of the school house platform one morning about half an hour before the morning session. "In those days no teacher would have dared to domineer round the way Beecham does now, I can tell you. It wouldn't have been well for him if he had. He would have been lugged out doors mighty lively. The fellows in the school had nerve in those days. They didn't allow any man to insult them. I shall never forget the winter we lugged Charles Kendrick out and dumped him in a snow-drift," and Dave laughed loudly at the amusement which the recollection appeared to afford him.

"How was that?" queried Raymond, with evident interest.

"I've heard that affair referred to a number of times, but have never learned the full particulars of it."

"Yes, let's have it," came in eager chorus from the other boys.

"Well, you see," began Dave, who only wanted this invitation to tell the story, and who was delighted to have around him such an interested audience, "when Kendrick came here he was sort of looked upon as a last resort. He had the reputation of being a terror. The school here had the name of being about the toughest one in the county. Half a dozen different teachers tried their hands at it, but all of them came to grief. The people round town got disgusted and everlastingly nagged the agent. They got him terribly keyed up on it. He couldn't think of anything else, and vowed he'd find a man who could teach this school, if he had to hire a prize

fighter and pay him a whole year's money for a single term. After considerable correspondence he got on track of Kendrick, who was recommended to be a regular steam engine. He was a powerfully built fellow and had the reputation of being the best all-round athlete in his college. He had been hired at big wages to teach a number of hard schools and had never failed to straighten them out. In fact, he had got his name away up in that kind of business. Well, he got along here after a while. He reached the Corner on the afternoon stage from Bolton, and while he thawed himself out by the stove in Copeland's store, he proceeded to tell the people there just what he intended to do. The report that the school here was a hard one didn't frighten him a bit, he said. He should really like to see the school he couldn't teach. With him at the helm there would be no more term wrecks at the Corner. Of course he would probably have to dust out a dozen or two ringleaders before matters got settled down to a business basis, but that was to be expected. The young bloods would have to learn who their master was. After that, he promised his hearers, there would be no further trouble at the school. He assured them he'd straighten matters out if he had to flog every mother's son of us into our beds."

"I should say he was a fool to make such talk as that," said Raymond.

"Yes; even if he thought that way, it wasn't very good policy to let people know it in that public manner," added Ned Grover.

"What sort of a looking fellow was he?" queried several of the group.

"He was about five feet ten inches high, square-shouldered, stocky built and quick as a cat. He was a splendid boxer,

too. In fact, if he could have kept the whole school at arm's length, I don't doubt but what he could have done all he said he could, and more. He was an athlete, every inch of him."

"I should suppose you fellows would have been afraid of him," said Raymond.

"Well, to tell you the truth, we were for a few weeks—that is, until we had time to sort of take the measure of him; then we concluded that any dog that barked as much as he did wouldn't bite very deep when it came to a fight."

"How did he start in?" asked Ned.

"As pompous as old King Cole himself. After he had called the school to order, he made us a little speech. He said he had heard the school spoken of as a hard one, and he understood that its pupils had behaved outrageously toward former teachers, but there was going to be a radical change that term. Then he showed the school a heavy ruler and a big rawhide. 'These are hard masters,' says he, 'but it depends entirely with you whether they have any work to do this term or not.'"

"What did you say to that?" asked Raymond.

"Not a word, but we kept up a considerable of a thinking. You never saw such a tyrant as that Kendrick was from the time he started in until the time we finally put him out. A cat couldn't have watched a mouse any closer than he watched us. He seemed to delight in studying up new punishments for the smaller scholars, but we soon began to notice that, with all his big talk, he didn't appear anxious to have any trouble with us large fellows. Well, matters went along quietly for about three weeks, but there was a storm brewing all the time, and finally it burst. All of us large boys were in the history class. We took that study on purpose so that

we might all be together when we got ready to run Kendrick out. While we were reciting one day little Ted Avery, the widow Avery's little lame son, did something—I never knew what—that made Kendrick mad. Quicker than it takes to tell it he had the frightened little fellow by the coat collar and dragged him into the floor in front of the school. There he held him out at arm's length and shook him till he was dizzy and dazed. When he finally let go of him the poor little chap fell to the floor in a dead faint. That was more than we fellows could stand. We just rose in a body from those front seats and fell upon Kendrick like a barrel of bricks. We took him completely by surprise, and he didn't have time to ward us off before we clinched with him. When we once got glued onto him, he couldn't shake us off."

"Did he fight?" was the eager query from several of the boys.

"Did he fight!" repeated Dave, as if amazed at the question. "Well, I should rather say that he did. We fellows never realized before what a cordy, powerful fellow he was. He made the dust fly, I can tell you. A demon couldn't have struggled more desperately. At times it almost seemed as if he'd get the upper hands of us in spite of all we could do, but we were too many for him, and finally winded him. I tell you, it was awful exciting about that time around these premises. The girls screamed and ran out doors, while the small boys showed their hatred of Kendrick by cheering us on, and bringing us woolen comforters from the entry to tie him with. We were a pretty hard looking crowd when we finally choked the fight out of him. All of us were covered with dust from head to foot, and not one of us had a whole suit of clothes on his back. Our hair was all ruffled up, our collars torn off,

and a number of us were bleeding from scratches we had received, but we didn't mind that a bit. We had knocked Kendrick out and were happy. We tied him hand and foot and laid him, breathless and gasping, upon the teacher's platform, about the most surprised man, I think, there ever was in the town of Chestnut."

"What did he do?" asked Raymond.

"Well, just as soon as he could get his breath he began to cry baby and blubber like a great calf. I never saw a man come down the way he did. He promised to do entirely different in the future if we'd only let up on him; but we didn't dare to trust him. We lugged him out onto this very platform and bounced him into a big, soft snow drift that stood over there at the south end of it. That wilted him completely. When we brought him back into the school house he was bawling like a great overgrown child and begging us to let him go."

"Did you do it?" asked Ned.

"No, we didn't dare to take any chances with him. We left him there, packed up our books and went home. Some of the small boys who owned the comforters we had tied him with let him go after we had left the school house. I can just tell you boys the affair kicked up an awful row, and there was terrible excitement in town—but most of you know all about that. There was no more school that term. Kendrick was horribly mortified and left town the very next morning. He has never shown up in these parts since."

"What was done about it?" asked Raymond.

[&]quot;About what?"

[&]quot;Your row with Kendrick."

"Well, the committee concluded that no live man could teach the Corner school while we fellows were in it, so they expelled every one of us who had a hand in lugging out Kendrick. I am the only one of the crowd who has ever been in this school house as a pupil since. I tell you, those were live times," he continued, enthusiastically. "We had boys with blood and backbone in school then. They wouldn't have stood Beecham long, you may be certain; but things are different now. I'm out of that kind of sport. It wouldn't look right in one of my age; besides, I've got round where I want to learn something."

"I don't see any similarity between that man Kendrick and Beecham," declared Raymond emphatically.

"Why not?"

"Kendrick was a coward and a bully, while Beecham is a gentleman."

"Oh, of course Beecham isn't like Kendrick," assented Dave. "I never said he was. I only said our old crowd wouldn't have stood him; but that doesn't signify much. They wouldn't have stood anybody in the shape of a teacher."

"I thought you were trying to draw a comparison between the two men," said Ned.

"No, I wouldn't undertake to do that. The two men are totally different. It's lucky Beecham isn't a Kendrick, though. It would be rough on this school where there isn't blood enough to do anything but grin and bear whatever comes along."

"Yes, no doubt the valor of this school forever passed away with the heroic souls who helped you lug Kendrick out," said Raymond, with an impatient sneer. It was evident that the slurring remark of his cousin had nettled him. "We are not

altogether bereft, however," he added. "You are still with us."

A shout of laughter greeted this remark, but Dave maintained an unruffled good nature.

"Don't get excited, my boy," he said with a quiet grin. "I haven't said you fellows were without courage. I simply call attention to the fact that you have given very little indication of it this term. Once in a while a fellow does something that has a suspicion of spunk about it, but the others don't stand by him, and he's frowned right down."

Dave's remarks were closed by the ringing of the teacher's bell. But the manner in which he had made the disgraceful conduct of himself and his companions, in resisting their teachers, appear commendable and even heroic had not been without its injurious influence upon his hearers. Many of the younger boys thought that day, as they sat in the droning school room, what a fine thing it would be to end the burdens of the term by tieing Mr. Beecham and lugging him out doors. Fortunately there were none among them foolhardy enough to attempt such a thing, though Dave Weston deserved no credit for the fact. His whole influence had been injurious to the highest interests of the school, although he would doubtless have vigorously protested that such was not the case, had he been brought to task for his unmanly conduct.

The afternoon that Ezra Johnston was given his grand tumble Mr. Beecham kept Raymond after school and had a long and earnest talk with him. He told him that life was altogether a more serious matter than he was making it; that he had come there to lay the foundations for what he hoped would be a good and useful career.

"I know, Raymond," he said earnestly, "that you have abilities that, with proper use, will some day place you in the front rank of influential men; but you must make a better use of them than you have here. You might easily lead in your classes if you would only apply yourself to your books, but instead of that, with the exception of history, you rank low in all of them."

"There are a number lower than I, Mr. Beecham."

"That is true; but it is no recommendation for a young man to say that he is not the lowest in his classes when, with just a fair amount of application, he might be easily first in all of them."

"I have studied considerably, Mr. Beecham."

"You have, by fits and starts, done good work. That method does not bring the best results anywhere, Raymond. It is only persistent effort that achieves the highest success. Your conduct this term has been an injury not only to yourself, but to the whole school."

"The whole school?"

"Yes; you seem a little incredulous, but it is, nevertheless, a fact. You have a great influence over your associates, and the course you take has very much to do with the success or failure of this school. I had hoped to find in you a help and support, but almost from the beginning of this term you have been deliberately engaged in robbing your fellow pupils."

"You don't mean to charge me with stealing, do you?"

"In the sense you mean, no; in a more important sense, yes. Many of the pupils here do not enjoy your advantages. This is the only chance a number of them have had to attend school during the whole year. It is very important that they should make the most of their opportunities. Whatever

they acquire here will be of great assistance to them in the future. Now, whenever you, or anyone else, distracts the attention of fellow pupils from their books, you take from them so much that would otherwise be theirs, and they go away from here at the close of the term so much the poorer prepared for the work of life."

"I had never thought of that," said Raymond soberly.

"But it's so, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, I hope you will never rob any of your fellow students again, Raymond. I have never asked you if you were responsible for any of the pranks that have been committed this term. I knew you were too brave and manly a fellow to lie about it, and I did not want to take advantage of your truthfulness to convict you of those things. You know it is a rule of our courts that witnesses need not criminate themselves."

"I am glad you have had this talk with me, Mr. Beecham. I have behaved outrageously, but I mean to do better. I'll turn over a new leaf this very day. Here's my hand on it."

Mr. Beecham shook the proffered hand very cordially, and started for his boarding place with more buoyancy of spirits than he had felt for a fortnight.

Raymond was unusually silent as he and Ned Grover drove home behind the gray colt that evening. His companion told himself that he was thinking up some new mischief for the morrow. In this Ned was mistaken. Raymond was very seriously making some good resolutions. Had he kept them, this story might never have been written.

CHAPTER III.

TOM ATKINS TAKES A TUMBLE.

"I can show you a trick worth two of that."

It was Raymond Benson who spoke. He and Ned Grover had been watching some of the Corner boys who were angling for victims in front of Squire Copeland's store with an old pocket-book, to the under part of which was attached a stout linen thread. Several people had stooped to pick it up, only to see it elude their grasp and vanish quickly around the corner, where Jim Farris and Elmer Cole, who were engineering the sell, were stationed. In every instance the victims had joined heartily in the laugh which greeted their momentary surprise and discomfiture, and had taken a good position to enjoy thoroughly the chagrin of the next victim. But this sport had begun to grow a trifle monotonous. No victim had put in an appearance for some time, and the hardest thing in the world for live boys to do is to do nothing. All had grown tired of waiting, and eagerly gathered around Raymond to hear what he was about to propose. They had implicit faith in his power to originate plans for amusement.

"Let's have it," they chorused.

"You see, fellows," said Raymond, "it's a secret. Only Ned and I know it. Now I'm willing to let you into it one at a time, but no more. You see I mean to put each one under personal obligations not to give it away. If all of you

don't agree that it's better than that old pocket-book trick, I'll eat my hat. Now let every fellow who wants to know it hold up his hand."

Every boy but one promptly responded.

"Don't you want to know it?" asked Raymond of Tom Atkins, who had refrained from holding up a hand with the others.

"No, I guess not."

"Why?"

"Oh, you've got crowd enough without me."

"Yes, I guess so, too," said Raymond sarcastically. "When a fellow hasn't sand enough to stand in with the other boys, I wash my hands of him."

"That's so, we don't want him, anyway," came at the same time from several of the boys, and Tom, finding the atmosphere a decidedly frigid one, and fearing, perhaps, that he might be made the victim of his companions' displeasure, walked away and entered the store.

"I'm glad he's gone," said Raymond.

"So am I," added Harry Oakley.

"He always was one of the meanest fellows in the town," chimed in Sam Brown.

"Well, it's all right, boys," said Raymond. "If he doesn't want to join with us, he isn't obliged to, and nobody here appears to want him very badly, anyway. Now we'll come to business. I will stay here on the store steps with you, and Ned will be out behind the building on the platform of Bill Gleason's carriage shop. You fellows may go round there, one at a time, and he will initiate you into the trick. When you've all learned it we'll come together, if you wish, and see which one can do the best at it."

"That's first rate," was the general exclamation among the boys, who by this time were very much interested in Raymond's new scheme, and exceedingly curious as to the nature of it.

Harry Oakley was the first boy to go to Ned around the corner of the store.

"Well, what is it, old man?" he asked with an apprehensive look about him.

"Nothing very much, Harry," was Ned's reply. "Just sit down beside me on this platform and I'll show you."

"Propound the mystery," laughed Harry, as he followed Ned's directions.

"You see this rock," continued Ned, exhibiting a cobble stone about the size of a base ball.

"Yes, I'm all eyes."

"Well, the scheme is to put your hands under your legs from the outside, right here by your knees, and see how far you can throw this rock with them in that position."

"Is that all?" asked Harry with much disappointment.

"Isn't that enough, my boy? You'll find it considerably more of a trick than you imagine, I assure you."

"You hold the rock in both hands?"

"Yes."

"And throw it from between your legs?"

"Exactly."

"Why, a baby can do that. Well, here goes. Great Scott!"

This last expression was one of genuine surprise. Before Harry could throw the rock, Ned had seized him firmly by both wrists, and lifting him clear off the platform, dropped him gently to the ground, where he struck with a force and abruptness that, as he afterwards expressed it, "made his ears snap."

"Well, what do you think of it now?" asked Ned coolly, when Harry had recovered somewhat from his astonishment.

"It's great!"

"I thought you'd say so."

"Am I to stay here and see the other fellows initiated?"

"Yes, that's a privilege of the wise."

"Well, call the next candidate."

"See here, my boy, you must keep a sober face on you," cautioned Ned, "and mind you're all enthusiasm."

"Have no fears of that. I was completely carried away by it."

The next victim was Sam Brown, and the way Harry rolled upon the platform in a perfect paroxysm of laughter at the figure his friend cut, was a sufficient proof of the sincerity of his conversion. In this way all of the boys were initiated into the mysteries of Raymond's new game. As Ned was instructing the last one, Raymond, who was about to join the boys and witness the sport, was surprised to see Tom Atkins steal from the opposite side of the building and enter the store.

"The mean sneak! I'll bet he's been spying!" he thought, and turning about he went into the store, where he found Tom seated upon the counter, explaining the new game to an interested crowd of grinning loafers.

"You see, all the other boys were just green enough to bite," he was saying. "They'll do anything Raymond Benson wants them to, but I was a little too sharp for him. He tried to bluff me into it, but found it wouldn't work. There are one or two other people in the world just as smart as he is."

"And you stole out on the other side of the store and took in the fun, did you?" asked Bill Gleason, who spent more time holding down the nail kegs in Squire Copeland's store than he did in his carriage shop.

"Yes, I saw them put three fellows through. It was great sport," and Tom laughed heartily at the recollection.

"I believe you're stuffing us," chimed in big Joel Webber, who had been holding a whispered conversation with Raymond Benson behind the post office boxes.

"No, I'm not. I saw the thing worked on three different fellows."

"How did they do it?"

"Why, Ned had them sit down on the platform of Bill's shop, put their hands under their legs, so, and—"

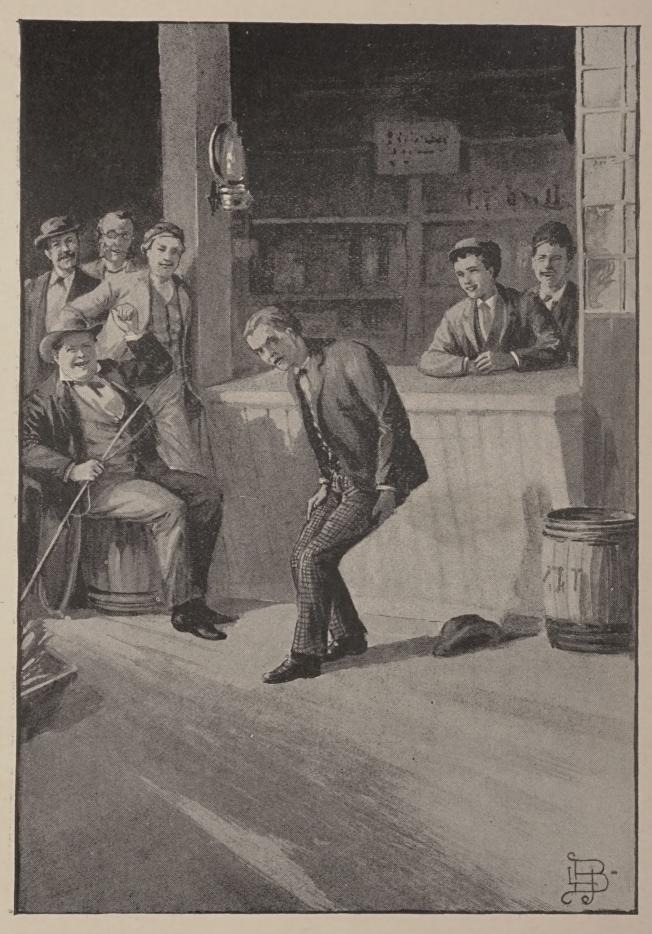
But Tom didn't complete his sentence. The moment his hands passed under his legs Joel seized him with an iron grip by both wrists, and lifting him clear off the counter, dropped him upon the floor, where he struck with a force that made his hair stand on end, and brought out all the rattle in every piece of crockery and hardware in the store.

There was a perfect roar of laughter from those present, which was heartily joined in by Ned Grover and the other boys, who entered the store just in time to witness Tom's grand tumble.

"Oh, I shall be lame for a month! I shall be lame for a month!" howled the unhappy victim, as he limped to a seat on a neighboring nail keg. "That's your work, Benson. I'll get even with you some day," he added fiercely.

"I thought Joel did it," laughed Raymond.

"Well, you put him up to it. Enjoy your fun now. My



"OH, I SHALL BE LAME FOR A MONTH!" (Page 46)

100 M

turn will come some day, and then it won't be such a laughing matter for you."

"I begin to see why Tom didn't join us," said Raymond, turning to the boys.

"Why was it?"

"He felt a little high-toned and wanted an initiation indoors all by himself."

"Yes, but there was probably another reason," chimed in Ned Grover.

"What was that?" asked several of the boys.

"The drop from the platform of Bill's shop wasn't far enough for him?"

Another roar of laughter greeted this sally.

"You fellows may get all the fun out of this you can," growled Tom, who was fairly choking with rage and mortification. "My innings will come later on."

"Yes, but you won't be able to bat our curves," returned Raymond Benson over his shoulder, as he followed his companions out of the store.

"We'll see about that," was the sullen rejoinder, and there was a look on Tom's face that boded no good to the object of his anger.

"He's a mean fellow, and I'm glad to see him taken down a peg," said Elmer Cole, when the boys had assembled again in front of Cobe Hersom's shop.

"So am I," was the hearty rejoinder from a number of the group.

"We mustn't be too hard on him, fellows," said Raymond soberly. "He's the under dog just now and we can afford to be generous toward him. Besides, we must remember that he has never had the chance that most of us have."

"That's so," added Ned. "I've heard father say many a time that it would be the greatest blessing that could happen to this town if old Pete Atkins and his tribe would move away from it."

"If justice were done I guess two or three of them would leave town and board at government expense," said Sam Brown.

"How so?" asked Raymond.

"Why, you don't suppose the whiskey old Pete sells ever pays any duty, do you?"

"I had never thought much about it."

"Well, you may just make up your mind that it doesn't. There is reason to believe that every gill of it is smuggled across the line."

"Why don't the Custom House officers at Bolton stop him?" asked Jim Farris.

"That's easier said than done, my boy," answered Ned Grover.

"I don't know why. The government pays those officers to see that the duties are collected on all articles that come across the line. It seems to me they can't be attending to their work very well when they permit a man to smuggle liquor almost under their noses."

"How many officers are there at Bolton?"

"I don't know."

"Well, there are only three. These, with three deputies who are stationed in the northern part of the county, make up the whole force of the Custom House. It seems to me that six men would have to spread themselves out pretty thin to stop smuggling on a frontier one hundred and fifty miles long, and covered nearly the entire distance with a dense forest growth."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"I didn't suppose you had. It's the fashion round here to blame the Custom House officers if everyone who smuggles anything through the woods isn't discovered and brought to trial. I think they do everything they can, though. It must take about all of their time to look after matters at Bolton, where the bulk of the imports come. I don't see where they'd find much for patrolling the country cross roads, let alone a hundred and fifty miles of wilderness."

"You're right, Ned," said Raymond. "Where people live within eight miles of the Canada line, as we do, it is impossible to prevent more or less smuggling. Grandfather says he has never known a time when it wasn't carried on to some extent, and never expects to, while the present conditions exist."

"The officers do catch them sometimes, don't they?" asked Harry Oakley.

"Oh, yes, frequently. At the last term of the United States circuit court at Portland there were five from this county tried on that very charge."

"What was done with them?"

"One of them was discharged for lack of evidence, two were heavily fined, and two sent to prison."

"I should think that would sicken them of the business."

"It very likely will, those particular ones, but they are a very small fraction of the men who are engaged in this business. It isn't altogether whiskey that's smuggled, either."

"I guess, if the truth were known, old Pete Atkins's operations are not confined to that," said Sam Brown.

"What makes you think so?" asked Raymond.

"Well, a year ago this fall, when my cousin Dick Richards was visiting me from Portland, I took him down on Letter K, where Amos Dole operated the winter before, intending to use his old log camp on the banks of Bower Brook, and have two or three days hunting and trout fishing. We carried everything necessary for the trip in packs on our backs, and reached the camp about dusk. To our surprise we found it occupied. Old Pete Atkins and a stranger—a swarthy faced, rough looking man, about forty years of age, - were there before us. They greeted us cordially enough and invited us to come right in with them, but it was plain to me that they were not much pleased at our coming. In one corner of the camp they had several large packs, and they were not filled with bottles or jugs either, for old Pete threw a large iron bar that laid across the deacon seat * upon them in a way that showed he wasn't afraid of breaking anything. Neither he nor his companion had very much to say to Dick and me. They went outside the camp and I could hear them holding a very earnest conversation in the horse hovel. The next morning when we woke up they were gone, and so were their packs. I would have given a good deal to have known what was in them."

"Most likely the Custom House officers would, too," added Raymond.

When the boys, who had been walking as they talked, arrived at the school house, they found that their morning sport had made them nearly half an hour late, but Mr. Beecham forebore to reprimand them.

The Letter K, to which Sam Brown had referred, was an

^{*} The benches that encircle the fire of a lumber camp.

unincorporated township some eight miles below Chestnut Corner. It was a wild, desolate place, covered with a heavy growth of timber. Through it ran Bower Brook, a good sized stream, which terminated on the swamp lands at the lower end of the township in a long stretch of deep, sluggish current called the Dead Water. Here fishermen who had the courage to work their way from the timber ridges across the stretch of bog that intervened, were said to catch the most beautiful trout that were to be found anywhere in that section of the state.

The township also abounded in game. Every fall large flocks of partridges came forth from it to feed along the borders of the county road. A number of bears were annually trapped upon it. Cobe Hersom kept a score of heavy steel traps set for them all over the township, and scarcely a year passed that he did not succeed in capturing five or six.

There were reports, too, of even fiercer game having been seen upon it. Ezra Johnston had set the whole Corner wild two years before our story opens, with a thrilling account of a mysterious wild animal which had followed him for several miles through the township. He was returning from Mattawamkeag, where he had been to get a load of iron for Cobe Hersom. Just as he got midway of Letter K, where its dense timber growth almost overlapped the county road, he observed what he at first took to be a large dog following his team. Upon a second look, however, he discovered that it was not a dog, but a wild animal somewhat resembling a large cat. Ezra declared that he could see its great yellow eyes gleaming through the pitchy darkness, and hear its jaws snap together in anticipation of the supper it was about to enjoy. He noted the fact that its fur was quite long and of a

light brown color. The chances of escape looked small, but he whipped his horse into a gallop and took a firm grip on one of the shorter iron bars, determined to make as brave a fight as possible. Looking behind him, he saw the animal following him at an easy trot, but keeping a respectful distance from the wagon. The reason of this suddenly occurred to him. The beast was afraid of the rattling made by the iron. It did not dare to spring upon the team, but was determined to keep it in view.

Thenceforth Ezra always declared that the most cheering sight he ever saw in his life was the light of the clearing beyond the woods, when it finally came in view. He looked behind him and to his intense relief saw the mysterious animal turn about and disappear in the darkness of the forest. It had been a close shave, but he was safe. Then and there he formed the solemn resolution never again to venture into the wilds of Letter K unless he was thoroughly armed.

There was an excited crowd of loafers at Squire Copeland's store when Ezra drew up in front of it, his horse covered with foam, and with white face related the details of his startling adventure. For more than a week it was the talk of the whole town. It was the general opinion that the mysterious animal was none other than an Indian devil (a provincialism for cougar, or, as the early settlers had called it, catamount.) Some inclined to the belief that it was a lynx, but this Ezra emphatically denied. He had killed altogether too many of those in his life not to know one when he saw it.

And so the wonder grew. Many people became timid about venturing out after dark, and there were few in town who cared to pass unarmed through a piece of woods at night, if it could be avoided. Several hunting parties were formed

to find the mysterious animal, and Letter K was thoroughly scoured, but all in vain. Not a trace of it could be discovered.

As time went on public confidence in Ezra's story began The loafers who had been at Squire Copeland's store that night suddenly remembered that a strong odor of whiskey had flavored the old man's excited description of his Then there were some few inconsistencies in the adventure. How, it was argued, could Ezra have possibly distinguished the light brown color of the animal in the pitchy darkness of Letter K woods on a night when there was neither moon nor stars? Then again, how could an Indian devil trot behind his team, when its method of locomotion was generally understood to be by long bounds? Why, too, should the rattle of iron bars have kept it from the attack when it could easily have made a short detour through the woods and seized the horse in front? No, undoubtedly Ezra had been the victim of an over-stimulated imagination. only wonder about his trip was, as Squire Copeland dryly expressed it, that he had not seen snakes instead of Indian The story ceased to be the wonder, and became the laughing stock of the town.

This fact did not prevent George Fields and Bill Stetson, two Corner boys, from getting a bad scare the following fall. They had gone to Letter K for the purpose of putting in a winter at gunning and trapping. They carried a generous supply of provisions with them and took possession of the lumber camp on the banks of Bower Brook which has already been referred to.

This they put in apple pie order, and with a good supply of wood, and a blazing fire in the middle of the camp, they

rolled themselves in their blankets that night with a feeling that they should enjoy a very pleasant winter.

Just as they were falling asleep, however, they were startled by an unearthly scream not far from the camp, followed by the sound of some heavy animal moving about in the underbrush. There was no more sleep for them that night. With eager haste they barricaded the camp door, using everything available for the purpose, and then, with blanched faces, and rifles in hand, sat upon the edge of their bunks awaiting an attack—but none came.

At intervals through the night they heard the same unearthly screech, coming first from one side of the little clearing, and then another. It was nearly morning before the Indian devil—for such the boys were firmly convinced it was,—ceased his weird screams and withdrew into the depths of the forest. With the first rays of morning light the boys packed up their camp outfit and started for home, preferring to face the chaffing of their friends rather than to spend another night in close proximity to such a beast.

The boys only shared a very general fear of catamounts. Tradition handed down from the earlier settlers declared their method of attack to be the following of their prey by jumping from tree top to tree top, and then suddenly descending upon the unsuspecting victim with a mighty leap, bearing it to the ground with tremendous force and killing it instantly. It was many a day before the boys heard the last of their trapping expedition to Letter K. There were even some who were uncharitable enough to insinuate that their Indian devil, like that of Ezra Johnston, had its origin in whiskey which they had procured of old Pete Atkins on their way to camp.

The house of Atkins stood midway between the Corner and Letter K, and was the plague spot of the town. A more disreputable family it would have been hard to find. It consisted of old Pete, his wife and four boys, of whom Tom was the youngest. The farm they lived on was one of the best in town, and was carried on by old Pete's sons and hired help. The house was neat and well kept, for Marm Atkins, with all her failings, was a good housekeeper. The family had the reputation of being obliging and ready at any time to do a good turn for a neighbor.

But, notwithstanding these good qualities, the Atkins family were conceded to be the worst in town, and there was not one of Chestnut's respectable citizens who did not heartily wish they were out of it. They kept a notorious rum hole, and drunken orgies were an almost nightly occurrence at their home.

Several attempts had been made to close the place, but in every instance the party making the complaint had come to grief. Old Deacon Graves had his barn burned; Rev. Mr. Cross, the Methodist minister, had a fine horse so brutally stabbed and mutilated that he had been forced to shoot it; and David Clay, the chairman of the selectmen, had two valuable cows poisoned in the pasture.

Thus it came about that none of the people of the town cared to incur the enmity of the Atkins family, whom everybody believed to have been responsible for all these outrages. They were, therefore, able to carry on their nefarious business with little molestation. Many of the citizens began to fear that the town would never get rid of them; but it eventually did, and Raymond Benson, as we shall see, bore no small part in accomplishing this result.

CHAPTER IV.

JOEL WEBBER'S CLOSE CALL.

"Cobe Hersom's caught a bear!"

This was the startling announcement that caused a flutter of excitement among the pupils of the Corner High School as they gathered about the door early Monday morning of the third week. It was Elmer Cole who brought the news.

"Where?" asked a dozen eager voices in chorus.

"Down in Letter K. He caught it in a big steel trap he set last week. A party of the Corner folks are going down there this morning in a double team to get him. They say he's a bouncer."

"Here it comes now!" shouted Jim Farris, excitedly.

"What, the bear?" drawled Roscoe Bean, with a quizzical smile.

"No, the team. There it comes round the curve. There's Cobe and Joel Webber and—great Scott!—if Raymond Benson and Ned Grover aren't with them. I'll bet a dollar Cobe's going to take them down there. See! Ned's got Cobe's double-barreled shot-gun and Raymond has Joel's Colt revolver. Wouldn't I like to go, though."

"Bah! I don't see much sport in that," observed Allen Webster sarcastically. He was a New York boy, whose parents had sent him to the home of his maternal grandfather at the

Corner on account, it was said, of several disgraceful episodes in which he had been concerned at home. Allen looked down upon the people of the Corner, whom he considered exceedingly green, and, with a feeling that the town was much too small for a person of his importance, never failed to impress upon those about him the wonders of his native city. It is needless to say that he had not increased his popularity thereby.

"You don't see much sport in anything outside of New York," was Elmer's impatient response to his remark.

"Well, what fun can there be in shooting a bear in a trap, when he can't get away from you, and must stand up and take his medicine? Now if he was free, it would be quite another thing. There'd be some sport in hunting him then."

"No doubt of it."

"I shall never forget the last one I killed," added Allen.

"You killed a bear?"

"Yes, you needn't look so surprised. It's a fact. I had a pretty close call, I can tell you. It was a monstrous one. I have the skin now in New York. We use it for a rug in our front hall."

"I thought you were something of a bear man the first time I saw you," said Roscoe Bean dryly.

"Yes," replied Allen delightedly, assuming the remark to be a compliment. "It doesn't take people long to discover a genuine sportsman."

"What kind of a bear was it you killed?" asked Elmer,

struggling hard to keep back a laugh.

"It was a big grizzly. I was hunting with a party of friends in the Adirondacks. One day we were looking over a steep precipice. About half way down we discovered a small opening that looked as if it led into a cave. I made up my mind to investigate, so I got the fellows to lower me down the face of the cliff with a long rope, and crawled into the hole. Imagine my surprise when I found myself in a large cavern. I at once began to explore it, but before I had gone three rods I found myself face to face with the largest grizzly bear I ever saw."

"How did it get up the cliff?" asked Roscoe.

"It came into the cavern, as I afterward discovered, by a rear entrance on the other side of the mountain."

"It must have been a very trying time."

"You can just bet it was. Most fellows in my place would have run."

"They certainly would," interposed Roscoe.

"But I made up my mind to fight," said Allen, not noticing the interruption. "I knew it would do no good to retreat, for I had untied the rope from my waist to enter the cavern, and realized that such a course would only result in my being dashed to pieces on the bottom of the ravine."

"A very wise decision, I should say, under the circumstances," remarked Elmer.

"Well, I thought so. The eyes of that bear looked awfully bright in the blackness of the cave, I can tell you. I knew that a failure to bring down my game with the first shot would mean death to me. You may be certain it was an anxious moment. The muzzle of my rifle almost touched the bear when I fired. When the smoke cleared away, however, he was dead as a door nail, shot right through the brain."

"A very lucky shot, certainly," said Roscoe.

"Yes. Most fellows would have felt like bragging a little over it, but that isn't my style."

"So we've observed," said Elmer with a comic seriousness that made the members of the little group grow red in the face in the effort to smother their laughter.

"I was in that cave just fifteen minutes," continued Allen, "and when I came out I had that bear skin in my hands. Perhaps the fellows weren't surprised, though. You see they hadn't heard the report of my rifle and didn't have a suspicion of what was going on."

"Let me see, this occurred in the Adirondacks, did it?" asked Roscoe.

"Yes."

"And the bear was a grizzly?"

"Yes, a monster."

"It was a lucky thing for Davy Crockett that he died before your day."

"Why so?"

"If he hadn't, he would never have brought that coon down."

The pent up laughter of the group found vent most heartily at this remark.

"There are some country bumpkins whom it doesn't pay to waste breath on!" said Allen as he walked angrily into the school house.

"I don't see what that fellow tells such outrageous lies for," remarked Elmer Cole when he had gone. "He must take us all for infernal idiots."

"He does," answered Roscoe, "and is desirous of making us open our mouths in wonderment. The fellow shows considerable imagination, though. He would shine as a dime novel writer."

The team which had started for the bear was now opposite

the school house, and Raymond and Ned came in for some good natured chaffing.

"Be sure and stab him through the lungs."

"I'll take six pounds of steak."

"Bring me a fore quarter."

"Save me one of his tusks for a watch charm," were a few of the pleasantries that followed them as they passed from sight over the brow of the hill.

"They've given us considerable business," said Raymond.

"You must do your best to attend to it," answered Cobe.
"I've half a mind to get Dave Webber's meat cart and let
you and Ned peddle that bear out."

"Perhaps Mr. Beecham will feel that he can find better business for us at the school house," responded Ned. "I don't suppose he will like our being out this forenoon very well."

"Oh, just say to him that you were with me," said Joel good naturedly. "That will make it all right."

"We can call at Amos Dole's, the town clerk, when we come back, as long as we're going right past his house, and leave the nose and ears for a bounty," remarked Ned. "It will save us two trips."

"But that won't do," said Joel with a sly twinkle in his eye. "Cobe will have to take them home with him, or he can't make his wife believe he caught a bear at all."

"Why is that?"

"Well, you see he and Amos Dole went fishing down on Bower Brook not long since. Somehow they didn't have their usual good luck. They waded out across the bog to the Dead Water, but were unable to find the raft. They fished as best they could from the shore, but only succeeded in catching six small trout. Their feet were wet, and they were tired out and hungry, and, I suspect, somewhat out of sorts when they started for home. They hadn't gone more than a mile before they scared up a flock of partridges. Leaving their horse standing in the road, they took their shot guns and followed them into the woods. While they were there Dr. Lemons drove along the road. He knew their team, and reaching out of his buggy took the small string of trout from their wagon seat and drove on with them. When he got to Cobe's, he called, and gave them to Mrs. Hersom, explaining to her how he came by them. You may just believe Cobe and Amos were mad when they came back to their wagon with five plump partridges and found those trout gone. They raved round considerably, and vowed vengeance on the thief if they ever caught him.

'Where's your fish?' was the first question Cobe's wife asked him when he got home.

'Some infernal scoundrel stole them from the wagon while we were after partridges,' he answered. 'It wouldn't be well for him if I found him out.'

'Are you real sure you caught any fish at all?' she asked.

'Sure,' ses Cobe. 'Why, Mirandy, there were forty-nine as nice trout as I ever laid my eyes on. Not a one of them that wouldn't come near tipping the scales at a pound."

"Now see here, Joel," interposed Cobe good naturedly, "you're drawing that a little strong. I never said that."

"Oh, yes you did, Cobe," insisted Joel. "You needn't try to crawl out of it. I got my information pretty direct, and that was precisely what you said. He was pretty crestfallen, I can tell you, boys, when he sat down to dinner and found those six little trout before him.

'What are these?' ses he.

'Those are your forty-nine trout,' ses Mrs. Hersom. 'Dr. Lemon thought he'd get here a little sooner than you, so he brought them along.' Cobe never said a word. He ate his supper in silence and then slid out of the house 's if he'd been shot. They say he hasn't mentioned trout since," and Joel threw back his head and gave vent to a laugh so contagiously hearty that all the others found themselves joining in it.

"You must make allowance for what Joel tells you," said Cobe good naturedly. "He's given to such yarns, you know."

And so the ride was continued till the old "tote" road which led into the woods from the county thoroughfare was reached.

"Where's the bear?" asked Ned, as they climbed out of the wagon.

"He's down that road about a mile," answered Cobe.

"Are you going to take the horses down there?" questioned Raymond.

"Not yet. It's about all we can do to get a team of horses near a dead bear, let alone a live one. When we've done him up, we'll hitch onto that drag in the wagon and pull him out here."

As they went laughing and talking down the "tote" road the irrepressible Joel still kept up his fun.

"You never killed a bear, did you, Raymond?" he asked solemnly.

"No, but I've heard Allen Webster tell how it's done, many a time."

"Allen Webster!" exclaimed Joel in well feigned surprise.
"I thought he never stooped to anything less than mountain lions."

"Very likely he wouldn't now. That was when he first began."

"The opening chapter of his Adirondack yarns, you mean," laughed Ned.

"Yes, I referred to his works of fiction."

"Well, that may all do for fiction, my boy," said Joel, "but when you meet a bear—a real live bear, my boy, you must first of all be sure and—"

"What?" asked Raymond and Ned in eager chorus.

"Keep cool," responded Joel with the air of a man who had just imparted a great truth.

"Of course," said Raymond impatiently, "but what next?"

"Well, you want to creep up to the bear softly, taking great pains not to rouse him."

"You don't suppose he'll sleep much in that trap, do you?" asked Ned.

"No, not sound sleep; probably nothing more than a troubled doze. But, as I was about to say, creep up to him softly, being careful not to disturb him. Then seize him suddenly by the tail, get a half hitch round the nearest tree and hold him firmly while your companion ties his knife on the end of a pole and stabs him to death."

"How many did you ever dispose of in that manner?" laughed Raymond.

"Well, not very many. I never was very scientific, but you see—Great Scott! What's that?"

Joel dropped his bantering tone with this remark and cast a startled glance in the direction of a heavy growth of firs and cedars to the right of them, from which issued a low, savage growl.

"Well, there he is, boys," said Cobe. "He's awake."

"No chance for Joel to creep up behind him and get that half hitch," said Raymond with a rather nervous laugh. The growl had startled him considerably more than he would have cared to own.

"Perhaps he can do it now, if he's only quick enough," remarked Ned. "Why don't you try it, Joel?"

"I'm too generous," was the response. "I really couldn't think of depriving you and Raymond of such a chance to practice. How are we going to get him out of there Cobe?"

The latter question was answered by the bear itself, which suddenly emerged from the thicket, dragging the heavy log clog to which the trap was attached, and giving vent to a succession of savage growls that woke the forest echoes. The cruel teeth of the heavy steel trap had fastened themselves through one fore paw, crushing the massive bones. The animal, which was one of the largest of its species, was evidently suffering the most intense agony and was in no mood to be trifled with.

"Don't get too near him," said Cobe warningly. "He's full of fight and if he takes after you it will astonish you to see what headway he'll make in spite of the clog."

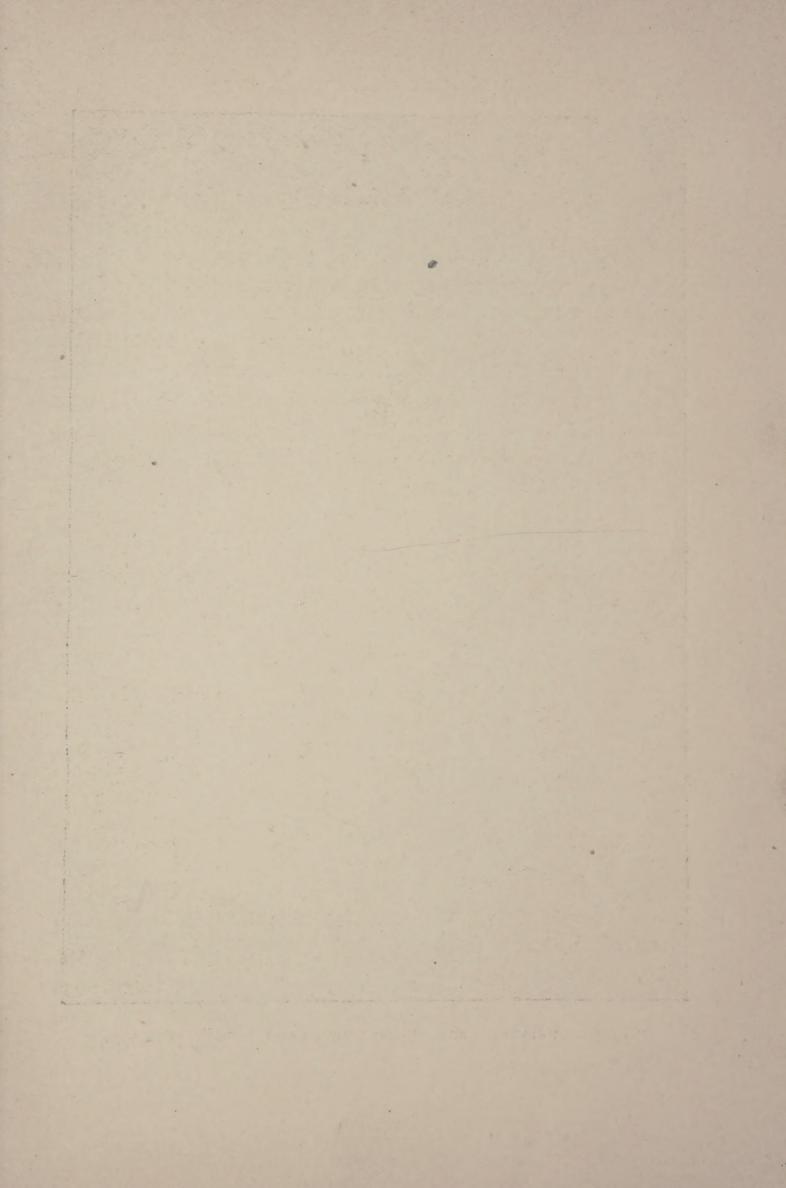
"He can't do much of that now," said Joel, as he slipped a cartridge into his breech loader.

"Why not?" demanded Ned.

"Just look at that clog," responded Joel, pointing toward the bear.

Ned glanced in the direction indicated and saw that the heavy timber to which the trap was attached had caught between two second growth maples and, to all appearances, rendered it impossible for the bear to make further headway.

"I wouldn't put too much dependence upon that," said





"THE INFURIATED BEAST BORE DOWN UPON JOEL" (Page 65)

Cobe warningly. "I've known bears to get away from much closer quarters. Just let me give him a pill from this Winchester. One of them will be enough to settle his digestion—hold on! where are you going?" he added hastily to Joel, who had suddenly left the group and was making toward the bear with long strides, holding his gun under his arm.

"To make the old fellow's acquaintance," was the laughing rejoinder.

"Well, I advise you to keep a safe distance — Christopher!"

The latter expression was one of alarm. In the plunging and pulling of the bear the clog had been thrown upon end and slipped between the trees. With a terrible growl of rage and pain the infuriated beast bore down upon Joel. For once in his life that worthy was thoroughly frightened, and with white face made a break for the "tote" road where Cobe and the boys were watching the scene, not daring to shoot for fear of hitting him.

"Take for a tree, Joel!" shouted Ned excitedly, and his advice would probably have been followed had Joel been able to do so. But just as he got to the foot of the maple for which he was making, the bear was upon him, and with one terrific sweep of its paw sent him spinning into the underbrush. A small scrubby fir which stood beside the maple had broken the force of the blow, which might otherwise have proved fatal. The bear was about to punish him further when a well-directed shot from Raymond's revolver caused him to face about. It was evident that he was badly wounded, but there was still lots of fight in him. With open mouth and angry growls he made toward the group on the "tote" road. He had not gone far, however, when a bullet from Cobe's Winchester laid him low.

It was rather a dilapidated looking individual who immediately after came crawling forth on his hands and knees from the underbrush. The one blow which the bear had given him had wrought strange havoc with Joel. His hair was disordered, his clothes badly torn, and the blood streamed over his face from several ugly scratches on the side of his cheek, whether from the claws of the bear or from the underbrush he was unable to tell. Notwithstanding his woe-begone appearance Cobe and the boys could not refrain from a hearty laugh at the sorry figure he cut.

"Yes, enjoy it, boys," said Joel disgustedly. "I've made a fool of myself and amused the audience. I want them to get all the fun out of the show they can. Lend me your handkerchiefs, boys, while I go down to the spring and wash this blood off."

"You meant all right, Joel," said Raymond quizzingly.
"You were simply going to show Ned and me how to half hitch that bear's tail round the maple."

"Yes, it was very clever—if you'd only been a little quicker," added Ned.

"Well, the bear seemed to hold the trump cards in that deal," grinned Cobe.

"Yes, and they appeared to be clubs," rejoined Raymond.

"I feel as if they came pretty near being spades," groaned Joel, as he limped away toward the spring which bubbled up a little further down the "tote" road.

Excitement reigned supreme at the Corner when the party arrived home about eleven o'clock with the bear. Everybody came to look at him and to get some of the meat, which formed an important item in the bill of fare at Corner homes that noon. Joel's appearance was the subject of no end of curious conjectures, but nothing could be elicited from any of the party. It was not long, however, before Ezra Johnston, who had dropped in to view the bear as it hung from a beam over the floor in Cobe's barn, and who chanced to see the bloody knife with which it was dressed, solved the mystery. Before night the report was all over town that Raymond had been seized by the bear and would probably have been killed had not Joel gone to his assistance and stabbed the angry beast, after a most terrible struggle. The big, good-natured fellow suddenly found himself a hero in the eyes of the Corner folks, but he bore his honors meekly. In fact, his only response to the encomiums heaped upon him was a sly wink at Cobe and the boys which was more eloquent than words.

Allen Webster was very much surprised at the close of school that afternoon when Roscoe Bean and Elmer Cole invited him to make a trip with them to the woods on Ezra Johnston's back lot to see how the beechnuts were coming.

"Wouldn't it be a fine thing if we could get a bear here?" said Roscoe, as they walked beneath the great trees.

"I should just say so," responded Elmer heartily.
"Wouldn't Raymond Benson and Ned Grover stick out their eyes, though?"

"I don't see what we'd kill him with," said Allen, glancing about apprehensively. "You really don't believe there were ever bears in these woods, do you?"

"Why, certainly," said Roscoe. "I've heard father tell of their coming out of here many a time and lugging off sheep."

"Yes," chimed in Elmer, "and you know they always thought it was bears that carried off that old gray mare of Widow Smith's."

The boys neglected to add that these events had happened more than twenty years before. It was evident that Allen was considerably wrought up by them. He laughed nervously at the sallies of his companions, and threw uneasy glances over his shoulder.

"I suppose the bears of this section would seem pretty small game to one of your experience in hunting wild animals," continued Elmer.

"I should say that a fellow who had killed grizzlies in the Adirondacks would find it exceedingly tame sport to club an ordinary black bear to death," added Roscoe.

"Yes, horribly tame, I can tell you. The last time I was in the Black Hills I—Hah! What's that?"

The occasion of this abrupt question was an angry growl that came from a clump of hazel bushes before them, through which suddenly emerged the head and paws of a huge bear.

"Great smoke! It's a bear!" shouted Roscoe, as he beat a hasty retreat.

"Yes," said Elmer, as he quickly followed him, "he's a buster, too. Seeing as you've had more experience in such matters, Allen, we'll just stand back and let you finish him."

But Allen paid no attention to either of these remarks. With the first appearance of the bear he stood for a moment as if rooted to the ground, a perfect picture of abject terror. His face was ghastly white, his teeth chattered, and his knees knocked together in a threatened collapse. But this was only for a moment. With the second growl that came from the bear he appeared to recover himself somewhat, and turning about, he disappeared through the woods at a rate of speed which the boys had never seen him attain before.

As soon as he was out of sight Raymond Benson emerged

from the bushes and threw upon the ground the skin of the bear which he had shot in Cobe Hersom's trap that forenoon, remarking in a voice convulsed with merriment, "That was a pretty bright idea, getting Cobe to leave the head and forepaws on that skin."

But Elmer and Roscoe were rolling upon the ground in a perfect paroxysm of laughter.

"I should say from the way he ran that he would do well hunting rabbits," continued Raymond. "He would be pretty sure of catching them."

"My soul, did you ever see the beat of that?" gasped Elmer.

"He seems to have degenerated since he killed that last grizzly," added Roscoe. "But perhaps he merely went after his dirk knife."

"Well, he must have got it by this time, then," laughed Raymond as the trio started down the narrow foot-path toward the Corner.

That evening all the people in the vicinity knew of Allen's adventure, and the group at Squire Copeland's store enjoyed more than one hearty laugh at his expense. It would be impossible to describe Allen's chagrin when he learned the nature of the joke that had been played upon him. It was many a day before he heard the last of it. The lesson was a salutary one, however, and during the remainder of his stay at the Corner he was never known to indulge again in any of his old-time hunting fictions.

CHAPTER V.

AN EVENING AT SQUIRE COPELAND'S STORE.

It was with mingled feelings that Raymond walked away from the Free High School after the trouble with Mr. Beecham narrated in the opening chapter. He endeavored to convince himself that it was wholly the teacher's fault, and that he had been a much abused boy. In this he was not altogether successful. He found it impossible to blot out the remembrance of many mischievous pranks, which had taken the attention of his fellow pupils from their books and rendered the work of his teacher far more trying than it would otherwise have been. In spite of his resentment he found himself wondering at the patience which Mr. Beecham had frequently shown under the most exasperating circumstances.

His anger cooled rapidly as he thought of these things. He began to feel that he had made a foolish exhibition of himself. In vain he sought to convince himself that Mr. Beecham had been harsh and dictatorial. Try as he would, the feeling remained that it was he himself who was in the wrong, and that before night the story of his disgrace would be in everyone's mouth. He dreaded to think how grandfather Benson would take it. He vividly recalled the words the old gentleman had spoken to him at the opening of the term: "No boy who tries to do just right need ever have any trouble with his

teachers." He knew that his course had often been far from right, and it sobered him to think how badly grandfather and grandmother Benson would feel when they learned the circumstances under which he had left school. For a moment he was almost prompted to turn back and ask Mr. Beecham's pardon for the trouble he had given him, and seek reinstatement in his classes. His pride, however, foolishly stifled this good resolution. What would the scholars say? Wouldn't they grin and nudge one another, and what a sissy they would think him to be! No, he wouldn't go back; that was settled.

He crossed the fields and took the foot-path through the woods on Ezra Johnston's back lot. A partridge flew up almost under his feet, but he paid no attention to it. Under other circumstances it would have aroused all the sportsman within him, and he would have hurried back to the Corner for a gun. He paused a moment before the clump of hazel bushes from the midst of which he had been able to frighten Allen Webster half out of his wits. Ordinarily the mere thought of this episode was enough to convulse him with laughter. But today it appeared to have lost its power to amuse him. He wandered aimlessly along the narrow cowpath and only thought of retracing his steps when he came to the large spring that marked the dividing line between the hard wood ridges and an extensive cedar swamp.

It was almost seven o'clock when he finally returned to the Corner. He found the team hitched in front of Squire Copeland's store and Ned walking up and down the platform, very impatiently awaiting his arrival.

"I thought you were never coming," was his greeting to Raymond.

"Why didn't you go home without me?"

"Well, I should have, if you hadn't come about when you did."

"What did the boys and girls say about my trouble with Beecham?"

"Why, they were considerably surprised, of course."

"Did they think Beecham was right?"

"Well, some of them did, and others thought you'd have served him just right if you'd laid him out with that ruler."

"But what should you say the general opinion was?" persisted Raymond anxiously.

"Well, to tell you the plain truth, old man," replied Ned slowly, "the prevailing idea appeared to be that you were in the wrong."

"Did they think it was my place to take a flogging simply for holding my head down when it ached?" exclaimed Raymond indignantly.

"No, but Beecham only asked you to hold it up, they say, and if you had told him it ached the first time he spoke to you, he would have excused you entirely. Of course, old fellow, I'm only speaking for the majority of them," added Ned apologetically, as if he feared that Raymond might doubt his loyalty. "I was with you right through, and if you'd had a fight with Beecham I intended to have a hand in it."

"Thank you, Ned," said Raymond gratefully. "A fellow can appreciate such a friend as you. I guess I'll not go home with you tonight. I'll stop with Uncle Weston. Dave is going to Bolton with a load of potatoes tomorrow morning and I can ride home with him. Please don't say anything to the folks about this affair, if you should happen to see them."

"All right. I won't say a word."

When Ned had disappeared over the hill that sloped in the direction of Bolton from the little stretch of table land upon which the Corner was located, Raymond turned into Squire Copeland's store. At that particular moment he felt an indescribable sense of loneliness. It seemed to him as if he were without friends, and a target for the adverse criticism of his neighbors. This is not a new or a strange feeling. Almost every live boy possessed of physical vigor and buoyancy of spirits has experienced it at some time—if he has an innate sense of honor and a heart that is in the right place. It is the reaction that comes from wrong doing—a feeling of self-condemnation far more gloomy and severe than any that other people will entertain. This Raymond was experiencing, and the sensation filled him with keen remorse.

When Raymond entered the store, it was a little early for the usual group that made their rendezvous at Squire Copeland's. The old gentleman himself had been drawn upon the jury and was in attendance upon court at Bolton. His son, Ben Copeland, was in charge of the store, and greeted Raymond with a cordiality that did much to dispel his gloomy thoughts.

"How are you, old fellow," he said with a cheerful laugh.
"I'm glad to see you. How does it go with you?"

"Oh, I'm able to be about yet."

"I guess that's more than Beecham could say if you'd dropped on him this afternoon. I tell you that kicked up quite a commotion. It's been the talk of the store ever since school let out."

"What did people say about it?"

"Well, they seemed somewhat divided. Part of them thought Beecham was too rough on you, and others thought

he ought to have given you a good flogging early in the term. I rather thought the sentiment was pretty generally in your favor, though. I told them that Dave Beecham would have bid off a bigger contract than he could fill if he'd undertaken to thrash you with that pointer."

"I'm much obliged, Ben. It does a fellow good to find out who his friends are once in a while. Are you all alone tonight?"

"Yes, and rushed to death, too. Jim Farris was coming in to tend post office for me, but he got word just before supper that his aunt at Bodge Mills was very sick, and he and his mother have driven over there."

"I'll tend it for you."

"Well, I'd like to have you first-rate, if it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"Not a bit. I'd like to do it."

"Very well, go in behind there. The letters and papers are in those alphabetical pigeon-holes. The boxes are all labeled on the inside. It won't take you long to get the hang of them."

"All right, don't tell anyone I'm here. Let them find it out for themselves," answered Raymond, as he passed around the counter.

From his position behind the boxes he was able to hear what was said in the store without being seen. For half an hour business was quiet. After that it grew more brisk and soon a good-sized group was gathered about the roaring Franklin stove that stood in the center of the store. A very little of its heat was sufficient to thaw out the various members of the assemblage, and politics, the crops, religion and various other topics were casually touched upon, eliciting a

varied range of opinion. Then followed a very earnest discussion upon the relative merits of certain pugilists, in the course of which Bill Gleason changed the subject somewhat by remarking that the Corner was developing a young man who would "whip the whole of them in time."

"Who is that?" demanded several of the group in chorus.

"Young Raymond Benson. They say he and Mr. Beecham had quite a set-to this afternoon. I guess if the teacher had pressed matters much further, there'd have been a good-sized row. Blamed if I don't believe the boy could lay him out in a hand to hand tussle. He's a wiry young fellow, and quick as a cat."

"I tell you that boy has had a bad influence round here," interposed Ezra Johnston. "He's a bad one, and all of the others are willing to follow his lead into any kind of mischief. I hope he'll go home now and stay there."

"I guess you're thinking of the time he and young Brown gave you that Highland tumble in the school yard, Ezra," said Joel Webber with a comical wink at the rest of the group.

A loud laugh followed this remark, to Ezra's very evident

discomfiture.

"Well, no decent boy would have been playing such pranks on a man of my years," he growled.

"You're right, Ezra," said Simon Dart. "The young men of today are altogether too forward. They don't know their place. Nobody can teach them anything. They know a good deal more than their elders, but not enough to treat them respectfully. If that boy was mine I'd give him a thrashing that he'd remember for one long day, now I assure you."

"Perhaps you would, and then again it's possible you wouldn't," muttered Raymond to himself in his retreat behind the post-office boxes.

If there was any man about the Corner most heartily disliked by the boys of the place, it was Simon Dart. He kept the only store in town beside that of Squire Copeland. His stock was a most miscellaneous mixture, and he had the reputation of giving astonishingly good bargains—a merit that went a good ways with Corner people; otherwise his trade would not have been a very extensive one. Simon was not a very prepossessing person. He was tall, lank and bony. His lips were thin, and he spoke with a sharp, nasal twang that always carried with it the effect of a whine. Simon lived alone. It was said that he had been married once, but that his wife lost no time in separating from him when she had had opportunity fully to find him out. There were also rumors that he had been engaged in some rather shady transactions, but there was no proof of this. The report had probably grown out of a strange intimacy which appeared to Be that as it may, exist between him and old Pete Atkins. Simon had few friends at the Corner, especially among the rising generation.

Raymond heard his response to Ezra Johnston with a strong impulse to come out from behind the counter and take him by the throat. He did not blame Ezra. He had played the old fellow a rough joke, and was not surprised to find that he still felt sore over it. Simon's remarks, however, appeared to him entirely gratuitous and uncalled for.

"I'm rather inclined to believe, my good man, that you would more than have your hands full, if you undertook that job," said Joel with a warmth that told Raymond that he had

at least one friend in the group about the stove. It was evident that the big fellow had not forgotten the good turn the boy had done him in helping dispose of Cobe Hersom's bear. Simon made no reply to this remark, but taking the articles which Ben had procured for him, and which had occasioned his visit to Squire Copeland's, left the store. When he was gone, the conversation was resumed by Amos Dole.

"I tell you, young Benson isn't the worst boy in this town, by any means," he said. "I know he's mischievous, and considerable of a practical joker. But he doesn't drink or smoke or swear, and nobody ever knew him to lie. Mr. Beecham told me himself, not more than a week ago, that he had never known a more truthful boy. No matter what mischief was going on, he was always sure that if he could get anything at all from young Benson, it would be the truth. He could never get a word out of him, however, that would betray any of his companions."

"That's it, exactly," said Joel. "When any pranks were played, Raymond would own up to his part in them every time. He carried all his sins on his own shirt front. The other boys haven't been as scrupulous. The result has been that Raymond has had to stand the blame for pretty much all the mischief that's gone on about the High School this fall. I don't think he's had a fair show—I swow I don't."

"There is probably some truth in what you say, Joel," remarked Deacon Graves, who had hitherto been a silent listener to the conversation. "The boy undoubtedly has good habits. It is probable, too, that he has been suspected of full as much mischief as he's been concerned in, but for all that, he hasn't begun to get his deserts. The worst fault I find with Mr. Beecham is that he is altogether too easy. He

should have kept a firmer hand. It would have been a wholesome lesson for young Benson if he'd given him a sound thrashing."

These words made Raymond wince. Deacon Graves was one of the most respected citizens of the Corner, a man of stern mould, old-fashioned in his views of life, but of sterling character. Raymond felt that he had spoken with some truth, and even the rejoinder of David Clay did not altogether reassure him.

"You're partly right, Uncle Graves," said the selectman, slowly, "but you mustn't forget that boys will be boys. I remember that my grandfather used to say years ago that he'd rather have a bad boy than no boy at all."

"Well, I think he was wrong. To my mind a bad boy is worse than no boy."

"The good boys are getting to be powerful scarce in this here town," chimed in a lugubrious voice which Raymond recognized as that of Dean Percy, who owned a farm near his grandfather's. "I tell you, it's a mighty hard thing for us that we live so near the Canada line. I was astonished to see how many of our young men were drunk at the town picnic last Fourth of July. Some of them from the very best families in town, too. Why, there was brother William's boy Amos among them. We always supposed there wasn't a steadier boy in the whole county. I can tell you his father and mother felt like death about it. Amos told them he'd never touched liquor before, and solemnly promised he never would again. I think he means it, too, but it shows what a pretty pass we're coming too, when boys like him get to drinking. I tell you that old Pete Atkins is a curse to this town. He's ruined an awful number of our young men.

he keeps on, there'll come a time when we sha'n't have any good ones left, and it will be pretty hard rubbing for us old fellows to keep the wolf from the door and get a little money to pay our taxes."

"You'd be a happy man, Dean, if it were not for the fear of want and taxes," laughed Joel. "It's amusing in a rich man like you, when everyone knows you've got mortgages and government bonds and railroad stocks hid away that the assessors have never been able to get hold of. To be sure, it's all clear gain for you, but it comes out of the town and makes it harder for us poor fellows whose property all has to come in for assessment."

"It's a lie!" retorted Dean hotly. "I don't own any bonds, or mortgages or railroad stocks. I haven't got but plaguey little, anyway, and all that's taxed to death."

"There, don't get sweaty under the collar," said Joel in a conciliatory tone. "Didn't you know I was only joking?"

"Well, I don't see anything to joke about in the tax question."

"You're too sensitive on the subject, that's all; but we'll drop it. I agree with you perfectly about old Pete Atkins. The town ought to be rid of him; still, I don't know many people hereabouts that wouldn't rather have his good will than his ill will. Uncle Graves and Mr. Clay can bear testimony to that."

"I don't make any charges," said the selectman.

"Neither do I," added the Deacon.

"Of course you don't," rejoined Joel, "but everyone knows you have your suspicions. I have serious doubts, though, whether either of you would feel any worse than the rest of us if old Pete Atkins were to leave town."

"He'll never go until there is something like concert of action among the citizens," said the Deacon bitterly. "One or two men can't rid the place of him."

"Yes," said Joel, "that's just the point. Public sentiment is altogether too cowardly. What's everybody's business is apt to be nobody's business, especially if there is any danger in engaging in it. Judge Foster is right when he says there is law enough on the statutes of Maine to crush out the liquor traffic, if it were only enforced. But there's the rub. It never will be enforced in a town where the citizens follow a 'hands off' policy, and where every man who condemns the business waits for somebody else to put a stop to it."

"You'd make a first-class temperance lecturer, Joel," remarked Ezra Johnston dryly.

"Perhaps I would. I think I could talk a little horse sense on the subject, and I shouldn't want a greater source of inspiration than an audience of fellows like you."

Ezra was about to make an angry rejoinder, but checked himself and said nothing.

"Speaking of the temperance question," said Amos Dole, "do you remember the argument that young Raymond Benson made on the subject last winter on the closing night of the Corner Lyceum? I tell you that boy's smart, no matter what they say of him. I believe he'll be heard from some day, if he lives. The question was: 'Resolved that Prohibition does more to restrict the liquor traffic than High License.' Young Benson had the affirmative and Mr. Beecham the negative. Now don't you believe that the question wasn't ably handled. I think I never listened to a more interesting discussion."

"Yes, I remember that," said the Deacon. "I thought, too,

that young Benson had a great deal the best of the argument. If I remember correctly, the members so decided by an over-whelming majority, when the question was put to vote."

"He's a natural speaker, and there isn't a young person in town who can get up so good a lyceum paper."

"Do you suppose he'll go back to the High School?" asked the Deacon.

"No, he's too proud. Besides, I don't believe Mr. Beecham would let him, after what has happened."

"Halloo!" said Mr. Clay, "here it is nine o'clock. Where in the world has this evening gone to?"

"Charge it up to Square Copeland's Corner Debating Club," answered Joel. "By the way, where are Cobe Hersom and Bill Gleason? I don't remember to have been in here of an evening this year without seeing one or both of them."

"They are on a hunting trip to Letter K," replied the Deacon. "I expect they are after that catamount," he added. But the well-worn joke failed to awaken any response. One by one the group called for their mail, which, at a sign from Raymond, was handed them by Ben, and took their departure. Soon the two boys were left alone in the store.

"Well, how did you make it?" was Ben's query, as he pulled down the curtains preparatory to locking up.

"Oh, first rate. I found the mail all right when it was called for."

"Did many people recognize you?"

"Yes, quite a number did, but none of those in that crowd about the stove. Deacon Graves and Sime Dart called for their mail when they first came in, but I was satisfied from their conversation later on that both of them took me for Jim Farris."

"You had a pretty good chance to get a view of yourself in the looking-glass of public opinion, didn't you?"

"Yes, and perhaps I shall be able to take my own measure better as a result of it. They said some pretty harsh things, and some pleasant things, of me. I'm inclined to believe that I was more deserving of the former than of the latter."

"Bosh, boy. You are altogether too modest."

"I mean it, Ben. I couldn't take any part in the talking back there, but I kept up considerable of a thinking."

"Well, you found you had some pretty good friends, didn't you?"

"Yes, and I can tell you, old fellow, I appreciated them. I realized more fully than ever before the truth of the old saying that 'a friend in need is a friend indeed."

"Where are you going?" demanded Ben, as Raymond began to pull on his overcoat.

"Down to Uncle Weston's."

"No, you're not. You're going to stop with me. Your cousin Dave will call at the store tomorrow to take some things to Bolton for us. You can go home from here with him. It would be foolish for you to think of walking clear out to the Weston Farm tonight."

It did not need very much urging to persuade Raymond to accept Ben's invitation, and a little later he was sleeping peacefully in the folds of one of mother Copeland's finest feather beds, oblivious of the day and its excitements.

CHAPTER VI.

RAYMOND SHOOTS PETE ATKINS'S DOG.

"I TELL you, Raymond, if Beecham had hit you, I should have taken a hand in the scrimmage myself." It was Dave Weston who spoke, and the way he shook the heavy whip he held in his hand showed that he meant what he said. Raymond was a prime favorite of his cousin's, with whom the question of right or wrong would not have been very carefully weighed when the matter of his chastisement was involved. The two boys were on their way from the Corner with a double team load of potatoes, which Mr. Weston was sending to a market at Bolton.

"I know you would, Dave," was Raymond's response to this declaration of loyalty. "But I'm glad you didn't. I'm sorry the trouble occurred. I haven't done the right thing this term. If I didn't deserve a whipping then, there were lots of other times when I did. I dread to meet grandfather and grandmother. Do you suppose they know of it?"

"Yes, father was there last evening and they had heard the whole story."

"What did they say?"

"He said they hardly mentioned the matter, but he thought they felt worse about it than they cared to show."

And then the conversation changed. Dave told his cousin

with evident elation how it had been decided that he was to leave in November to attend the Krampton Academy.

"I've gone about as far as I can here," he said, "and I shall have lots of advantages there that I couldn't get in any other way."

"I wish I were going with you," said Raymond.

"I wish you were. Don't you suppose your grandfather Benson would let you?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid he won't want to trust me away from home after what happened yesterday."

"Oh, well, I don't believe that will make any difference with him, when he knows all the circumstances."

Raymond made no reply. They had reached the brow of a long hill. Beyond this was a shorter one with a stretch of table land on the top, upon which was located the Benson homestead. How familiar everything looked to Raymond. The plain story-and-a-half red house with its long white ell held many pleasant memories for him, as did the large yellow barn which stood near it, and in which he had enjoyed many a pleasant romp when in younger days he had come from Bangor to spend his summer vacations upon the old place. Through the valley at the bottom of the little hill ran the best trout brook in the town. Raymond well remembered the first speckled beauty he had pulled from it, when a very small boy, with a bent pin for a hook and a line of braided linen thread. He had not stopped to catch a second one, but proudly grasping his trophy with both hands had hastened to the house to exhibit it, with shouts of triumph, to his admiring relatives. Since then he had caught many a handsome string from its waters, following it through the woods on lowery days to the Dead Water some eight miles below; but no other trout had ever given him such an exultant feeling of satisfaction as he derived from the first.

When the boys drove into the yard grandfather Benson was standing in the door of the little red horse-stable that faced the road from the rear of the ell. He was a man over whom time had passed lightly. Although nearly seventy years of age, his eye was still bright, and his step vigorous. He was of average height, a broad shouldered and square chested man, who, in his day, had ranked among the most powerful in the town. His face was always smoothly shaven, and the practice gave a peculiar look of boyishness to his round, full countenance. The square mouth and firm chin, however, betokened more than ordinary decision and strength of character. Grandfather Benson's eyes were blue, and always carried a bright, cheerful expression that gave the effect of a smile to his features. Everybody knew what a generous heart he had, and there was not a needy person in town who had not, at some time, been kindly remembered by him.

Raymond never forgot an incident that had happened years before. Grandfather Benson had sold a fine yoke of cattle and was planning a number of little comforts that he and his good wife would get with the hundred dollars he had received for them. That very night, however, a friend drove up to the house and told him that a fellow townsman had just been burned out, and was left with a wife, and a number of small children, in most destitute circumstances. The story brought the tears of sympathy to the good man's eyes, and hastening into the house he returned with the hundred dollars and insisted that the whole should be given to his unfortunate neighbor. He and grandmother Benson got along that winter without a

number of things they had hoped to have, but both declared they felt happier for it.

"Halloo!" he cried, coming forward as the boys drew up in front of the kitchen door. "I'm glad to see you. I was just thinking of harnessing up and going to the Corner. Mother felt some worried about you."

"Didn't Ned tell her I was going to stop over?" asked Raymond.

"No, he hasn't been here. I knew that must be it, though. I told her you were at your Uncle Weston's."

"I'm glad to see you, Raymond," said grandmother Benson, a white-haired, sweet-faced little woman, as she met him at the door. "I was afraid we had lost you."

Raymond noted a little tremor in her voice, and as she kissed him he thought he saw a tear glisten for a moment in her eye, but she brushed it resolutely away.

"Have you any errands for me in Bolton?" asked Dave, as he paused for a moment on the threshold.

"I don't think of any," answered Mrs. Benson. "I wish, though, you'd stop here on your way home. I've some things I should like to send your mother."

"All right," responded Dave, and a moment later he was out of sight over the brow of the hill.

"Have you anything for me to do today, grandfather?" asked Raymond.

"Not today. You need a little vacation," was the kindly response. "Tomorrow I am going to begin blasting those rocks in the front field. It's the only place on the whole farm where I can't run a mowing machine, and, as luck will have it, comes right on the road front. The farm doesn't show at first sight for anything near what it is worth. I'm going to

have two or three of the boys about here help me tomorrow. So you had better take a day off and go hunting or fishing. I scared up a partridge on the birch ridge the other day. It's my opinion there's a flock of them somewhere round there."

Raymond went to his room and was soon dressing himself in the strong suit and cowhide boots which he kept exclusively for hunting and fishing trips. It was a room after his own heart. Raymond called it his den. It looked down upon the brook, and through the open windows he could hear the rippling of its waters on summer nights. In one corner was a long cabinet filled with birds of nearly all the native varieties. They had been shot and mounted by Raymond himself, who was a taxidermist of no mean ability. Over one window hung a fine Winchester rifle and over the other a beautiful double-barrelled, breech-loading shot gun. Above these were several handsome jointed fishing rods in neat canvas cases. On the wall at the head of the bed two snow-shoes were crossed, a leather game bag serving as a center piece. From this was suspended an embossed leather sheath, containing a beautiful hunting knife, which Raymond always took with him on his sporting trips. The two bottom drawers in the large, old-fashioned bureau were filled with a fine collection of steel traps of various sizes, and many a pelt had their owner secured by means of them. These were only a few of the treasures that the den contained. No expense had been spared to make Raymond happy and contented while with his grandparents, and scarcely a month passed that he did not receive some new and substantial token of loving remembrance from his relatives at Bangor.

"I've been used a good deal better than I deserve," he muttered to himself as, shot gun in hand, he tramped along the birch ridge on grandfather Benson's wood lot about half an hour later. "Now most fellows would have got a pretty thorough dressing down, coming home under such circumstances as I did; but neither grandfather nor grandmother have referred to it at all. If I live, I'll show them that I mean to turn over a new leaf. I'll—."

Raymond's meditations were cut short by the sharp whir of a partridge which flew up almost under his feet. In a moment his gun was at his shoulder and a well directed shot brought the bird to the ground. Hardly had he stowed it away in his game bag before he was startled by the report of a gun near him, and a moment later Ned Grover came in sight from the opposite side of the ridge.

"Halloo, Raymond," he shouted. "Glad to see you. I thought that first shot must have come from you. What did you get?"

Raymond exhibited the partridge.

"That's a beauty," exclaimed Ned, "and shot through the head, too. Did you take it on the wing?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's what I call a rattling good shot. Do you remember the first time you and I ever went partridge hunting, old fellow?"

"Well, I don't think I shall forget it right away," laughed Raymond. "You had an old horse pistol that wouldn't kill anything in front of it, but was terribly dangerous in other directions. I had a little single-barrelled shot gun, with the ramrod broken off so short that every time I drove it home I had to turn my gun over to get it out of the barrel. Sam Eaton was with us, and was the only one decently armed. He had a double-barrelled, breech-loading shot gun. We

didn't have any luck at all till almost dusk, when we scared up a flock of partridges on the shores of Timbric Lake. It was in the edge of Brown's back clearing, and they flew into the tall fir trees just behind it. I went in and shot one. There was another in the same tree, but it never offered to fly. It evidently thought it was hidden. You tried your old horse pistol on it, but missed by more than a rod. I was hurrying to reload, but it was slow work with my short ramrod. Meanwhile Sam had shot two partridges further down in the woods. There was another one there, but he left it, and coming up where we were, shot the one we were after. Then he went down where he was first, and got the remaining one there. When we counted up the spoils, Sam had four partridges and we had one. Weren't we mad boys, though?"

"Well, I guess we were. I remember how we considered in whispers whether we hadn't better jump on Sam suddenly, give him a sound thrashing and take two of his partridges away. But as he had a gun in his hands, we thought it would be a dangerous undertaking. So we let him go, with a vow never to be caught gunning with him again."

"Well, I guess we've kept it, haven't we?" asked Raymond.

"Well, I know I have," answered Ned. "See here, old fellow, did you bring any dinner? It's nearly one o'clock, and I expected to be home by noon."

"So did I. This partridge is the only thing I have in the eatable line."

"Well, I have five more. Let's build a fire and roast a couple for dinner; then we can put in as much of the afternoon here as we want to."

Raymond readily assented to this, and soon two partridges

were sizzling on the spits in front of a blazing camp fire, while the boys, stretched out on a soft bed of boughs, indulged in reminiscences of old hunting expeditions.

"Do you remember the time we went down to Amos Dole's lumber camp on Bower Brook last winter?" asked Ned.

"Well I guess I do. Jim Farris and Elmer Cole were with us. We all had single-barrelled, muzzle loading shot guns. I never saw partridges so thick before, and never expect to again. We all got one except Jim, who missed his. When we loaded again we found that Elmer, who had the only box of caps in the party, had lost it through a hole in his pocket."

"That was a terrible disappointment to us," said Ned, "and as if to aggravate the matter, we kept stumbling on more partridges the further we went along the 'tote' road."

"Do you remember how you and I tried to substitute matches for caps?" added Raymond. "You got a good aim at a partridge in a tall fir and after considerable trouble I succeeded in touching the gun off with a match, but you couldn't hold it steadily enough, and we didn't come within a rod of the mark."

"Yes," said Ned. "We felt pretty sore over it, but we had to give up the idea of doing any more shooting that trip. We forgot all about that, though, when we got to the camp."

"What a good time we had," said Raymond, "with Jim Farris playing the violin and the men having a break down on the camp floor! What a dinner, too! Do you know, I don't believe anything ever tasted so good to me as those baked beans?"

"Yes," laughed Ned. "It was not so much the dinner, though, as the appetites we brought to it. How we should

turn up our noses at home, at beans swimming in pork fat, and strong tea sweetened with molasses!"

"You are right, old fellow. It isn't so much what we have in this life as the spirit in which we use it, that gives us our pleasures."

By this time the partridges were done, and although the boys had no salt with which to season them, they nevertheless ate them with a hearty relish and voted them a dinner fit for a king. After it was over, they resumed their hunting, and when they parted on the county road at dusk, about a mile from Mr. Benson's, each had a well-filled game bag.

The darkness settled down rapidly, but a myriad stars lit up the night. It would have made little difference to Raymond, however, if there had been none. He was thoroughly familiar with every inch of the road and could have found his way over it on the darkest night. Absorbed in his own thoughts, he walked briskly along, entirely oblivious of his surroundings. As he neared the long hill that hid from view the smaller one beyond, upon which stood grandfather Benson's house, he was aroused from his reflections by the rumble of a heavy wagon ascending the opposite slope.

"Somebody with a late start from the Corner," he thought, continuing briskly on his way. A few moments later, as he came upon the brow of the hill, he was startled by a low growl, and found a large English mastiff blocking his path. Raymond attempted to pass him, when, with a sudden jump, the dog buried his sharp teeth in his boot leg. Nothing but the heavy leather and the thick folds of his hunting trousers saved him from a badly mangled leg. With a startled cry he vainly endeavored to shake off the savage brute, which clung to him tenaciously. The impulse of fear was succeeded by

one of anger. Quickly swinging his gun from his shoulder, he placed the muzzle in the brute's ear and pulled the trigger. A sharp yelp followed the report, and the dog rolled over in the road, dead.

By this time the heavy team had arrived upon the scene. A tall man stood up in it, waving a heavy whip in his hand.

"What do you think you're shooting at?" demanded a deep voice angrily.

"I shot at a dog that ought to have been killed long ago," responded Raymond hotly.

"If you trouble that dog, I'll take it out of your hide," said the man fiercely, as he jumped from the wagon and strode excitedly forward. With a feeling of dismay Raymond recognized old Pete Atkins. The feeling passed away immediately, however. The anger Raymond had felt against the dog was transferred with interest to the master. He felt strong enough to whip ten men like old Pete.

"Perhaps you'd better be about it, then," he answered defiantly. "The dog is dead."

"Did you shoot that dog, you young scoundrel?" gasped Pete in an incredulous tone.

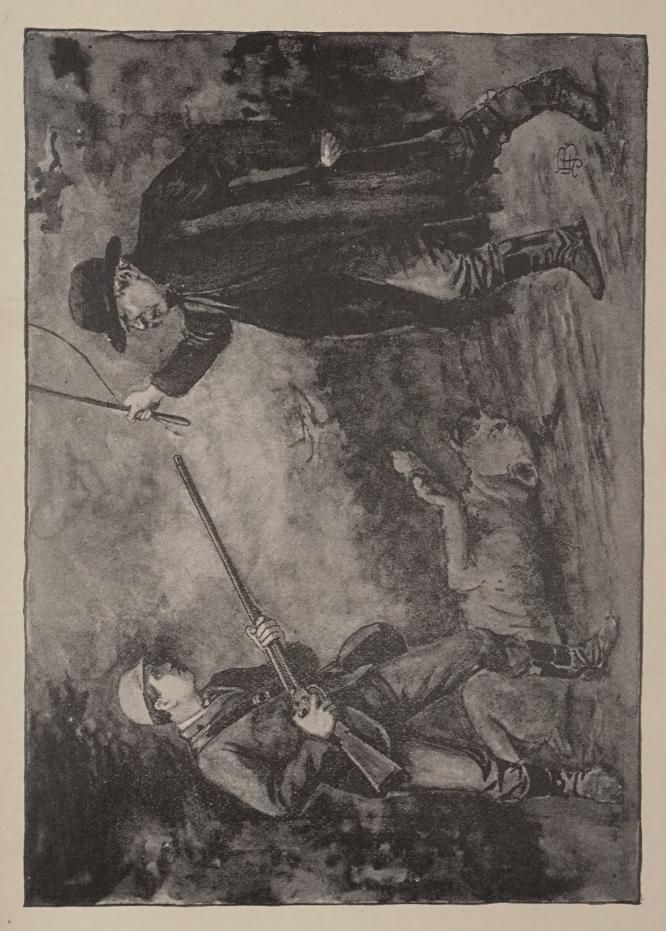
"That's exactly what I did. There he lies. He will never try to make a supper off me again."

"I'll give you something to remember this by, my young bantam," said Pete in a voice choked with rage, as he took a step forward. The sharp click of a gun hammer brought him to a sudden stop.

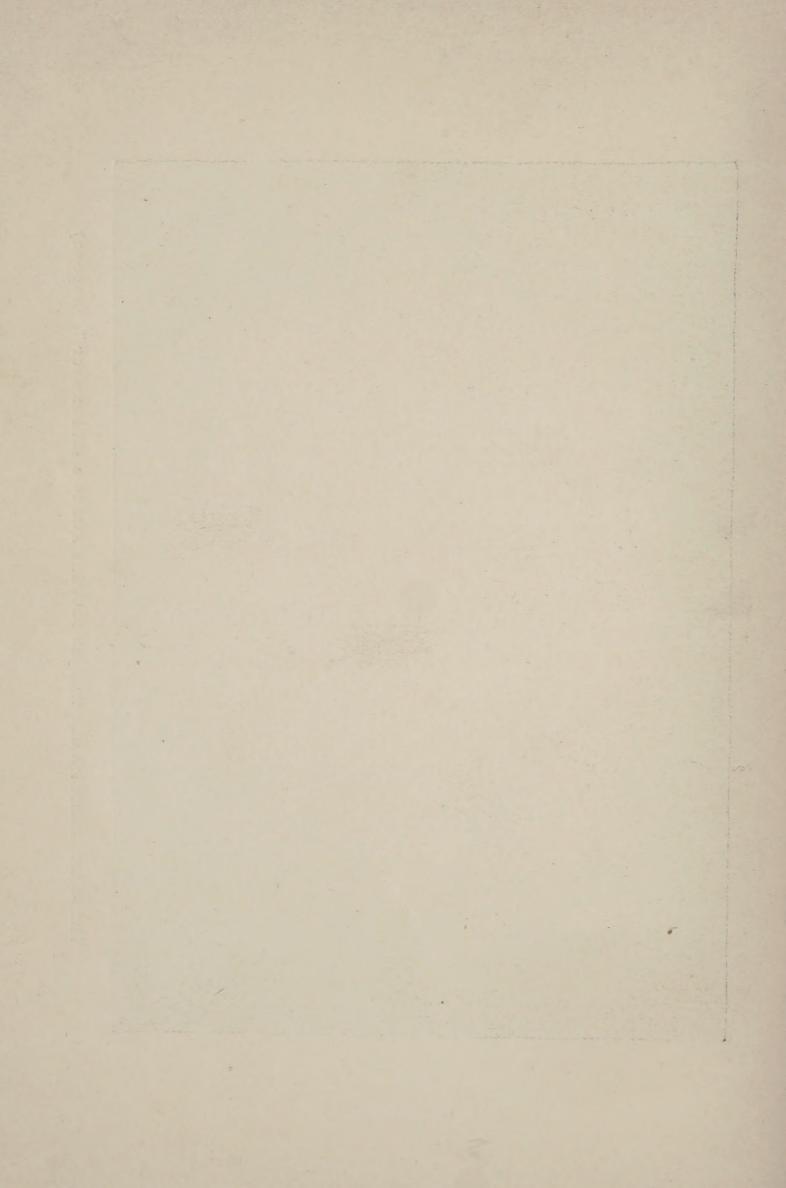
"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Getting ready for trouble, if you insist on it," replied Raymond coolly.

"You don't mean to say you'd shoot me, do you?"



"THE SHARP CLICK OF A GUN HAMMER BROUGHT HIM TO A SUDDEN STOP " (Page 92) ALL



"Well, that depends. If you touch me with that whip, I'll shoot you with as little compunction as I shot that dog. I'm not in a mood to trifle, just at present."

There was something in Raymond's tone that old Pete did not like. The boy evidently meant what he said, and although Pete was far from being a coward physically, he had no desire to furnish a target for a boy who had just given such practical proof of his ability and readiness to shoot.

"You haven't seen the end of this affair," he hissed fiercely.
"The day will come when you'll wish you had steered clear of Pete Atkins."

"Well, I don't fear him or his dogs, either," answered Raymond.

"The day may come, you impudent young upstart, when you will sing a different tune," sneered Pete, as he climbed back upon his team.

"Very likely," responded Raymond, with exasperating coolness. "I shouldn't want to confine myself to one song always."

Pete made no reply, but striking his horses a sharp blow with the whip, continued on down the hill.

"It was fortunate for me that the old fellow didn't know that neither barrel of my gun was loaded," muttered Raymond to himself, as he pursued his way toward home. "I used the last cartridge on that dog. I flatter myself, though, that I played a very handsome bluff with Peter. He didn't have nerve enough to try that whip on me. If he had, I think I should have hit him at least one or two wipes with my gun stock. I didn't like the old fellow's tone, though, when he made that last threat. He doesn't usually make idle ones. The town has had proof enough of that. I think he means

mischief. If I should catch him prowling about our place, I—well, it wouldn't be well for him, that's all," and Raymond patted his gun significantly to give emphasis to his reflections. "I guess I won't say anything about this to the folks," he mused. "It would only give them needless worry."

"You are rather late," said grandmother Benson as she met him shortly after at the kitchen door. "I began to feel worried about you. I have kept your supper warm, though. What success did you have? Why, that is splendid, I'm sure. I guess we shall not want for a dinner tomorrow," she added, as Raymond displayed the contents of his well filled game bag.

Raymond ate his supper in silence, and then followed his grandmother into the old fashioned sitting room where grandfather Benson sat before the roaring open fire, with the well worn family Bible in his hands, preparatory to conducting evening prayers, as had been his custom for many years. had never permitted anything to interfere with this, and all who had lived beneath his roof had recognized it as a regular feature of the household life. Tonight, in his quiet, earnest voice, he read the story of the prodigal son. Then, closing the Holy Book, he offered up a simple, but fervent prayer that all who had wandered astray might come back again to the bountiful forgiveness of their Father's home. It always seemed to Raymond that no other man's prayers were like grandfather Benson's—so simple, so earnest, so heart-felt. Tonight he was conscious that his grandfather had him in mind, both in his reading and his petition. For a time after the service he sat in thoughtful silence, then asked abruptly:

"Why is it, grandfather, that neither you nor grandmother have said a word to me about my trouble at the High School?"

We thought it best not to, my boy. Some lessons are better learned without a teacher. The school of experience has graduated some of the best scholars in the world."

"I think I catch your meaning," answered Raymond gratefully. "I know I acted disgracefully, but I am determined to turn over a new leaf."

"That's a good resolution, my boy. I hope you will stick to it," responded Mr. Benson, and from that time the subject was never alluded to again in Raymond's presence by either him or his wife.

"Did ever a fellow have such a good home as mine?" thought Raymond, as he lay in his bed that night. "Grandfather and grandmother have faith in me, and I will be man enough hereafter not to abuse their confidence."

CHAPTER VII.

DUD HAS A VISITATION FROM BURGLARS.

For a few days after he left the High School Raymond was busily engaged in work about the farm. Grandfather Benson had Byer Ames and Dudley Rich, two neighbors' sons, to assist him in blowing up the large rocks in the front field. Raymond and he had about all they could do to haul away the pieces with the drag and the span of heavy farm horses.

The work was not without its pleasures. Byer was a dry fellow, and his droll sayings were a constant source of amusement. Many of them were directed at Dudley, or, as he was familiarly called, "Dud." That individual, however, bore them with the utmost good nature. He was a great strapping fellow over six feet in height and weighing more than two hundred pounds. Although Dud had muscles that would have done credit to a Hercules, and fists that could have knocked down an ox, he was, nevertheless, as timid as a child. He rarely ventured far from home alone after dark, and was constantly fearing a visitation from burglars, though he was unable to say what they could expect to find among his possessions to repay them for such trouble.

Raymond remembered with a twinge of remorse how he had frightened the big fellow half out of his wits during the Indian devil scare by jumping out at him after dark from the

alder bushes beside the brook. He had never known before how fast Dud could run when he was doing his very best. That night he had been forced to sleep with the victim of his joke, who was in a perfect tremor of terror. When Raymond saw how much he really suffered, his conscience smote him, and he made a vow never again to amuse himself by playing upon another's fears. It was a good resolution, but I am sorry to say that it had not always been scrupulously kept.

Among Raymond's most treasured possessions was a log camp that stood about a quarter of a mile from the house, in the cedar swamp that skirted the brook. He had built it alone at the expense of no small amount of labor. It was carefully chinked, and was provided with an old cook stove. In it Raymond had spent many a happy hour with Ned Grover and other companions.

One night, when the front field was nearly cleared of its boulders, Raymond returned from Cobe Hersom's shop at the Corner, where he had been to have some drills sharpened, and found the boys missing.

"Where are Byer and Dud?" he asked of grandfather Benson.

"Ned Grover came here, and they all went down to your camp in the swamp more than an hour ago," was the response.

"Did they have any guns with them?"

"No, I guess they just went down there for a social chat." Raymond lost no time in putting his horse into the stable. Then after a hasty supper, he followed the boys to the swamp. Creeping carefully along, he took a position in the brush pile just behind the camp. He could hear the boys within engaged in earnest conversation.

"I tell you, Dud, that whole thing was a fake," insisted a voice which Raymond recognized as Ned's. "Old man Johnston was just far enough over the bay that night to see anything, from panthers to porcupines."

"Well, take it right home to yourself, Ned," responded Dud. "If an Injun devil should follow you five or six miles through the woods, don't you believe you would know it, and even if you had been drinking a little, don't you think it would sober you?"

"Well, I never saw any animal of that kind in this county, and I've ranged the woods about as much as any fellow of my age. I don't believe any sober man ever saw one."

"Don't you believe there is such an animal?" asked Dud incredulously.

"Certainly there is, but not so far east as this. Indeed, I doubt if many ever got further east than New York state."

"I guess you are wrong there, Ned," chimed in Byer.

"I don't think I am."

"Well, I never took any stock in Ezra Johnston's yarns, but still I think there are catamounts right in this very county."

"Did you ever see one here?"

" No."

"Well, I have never seen a man that has."

"But I have," insisted Byer. "I have met men that had not only seen them, but killed them. There are too many records of that, Ned, to be laughed or sneered away."

"Of course there are," said Dud. "I don't doubt but what there are, at least, half a dozen Injun devils in this town today; perhaps there may be one in this very swamp." "I guess all the Indian devils we ever had departed with the noble red man," laughed Ned.

At this point Raymond began to sniff the air and give vent to low growls, at the same time scratching about vigorously in the under brush.

Exclamations of surprise came from within the camp.

"What's that?" demanded Dud in a quaking voice.

"I guess it's a lynx," replied Ned. "They and the foxes have been pretty plenty in this swamp since father hauled the body of the old bay horse down below here. I'm going to set some traps around him tomorrow."

"Yes, I guess Ned's right," added Byer, but Raymond knew from the tone of his voice that he perceived the joke and was merely playing a part.

"I never knew a lynx to act like that," said Dud tremulously. "You don't s'pose it's an Injun devil, do you?"

"Indian fiddlesticks!" replied Ned impatiently. "You haven't the sand of a mouse, Dud."

"He may not be so much out of the way as you imagine," interposed Byer solemnly. "That's certainly a larger animal than a lynx."

"By gracious! I won't sit side of this door any longer!" exclaimed Dud in terrified accents, as Raymond gave a growl that was louder and fiercer than any of the others.

Heavy footsteps across the camp told Raymond that the big fellow had retreated to the further end of it. This move called forth a hearty laugh from his companions. The growl which had so terrified Dud had revealed to Ned, also, the nature of the joke that was being played.

"You're right, Byer," he said. "That animal is certainly larger than a lynx. We had better take this axe and crow-

bar and close in on him. Dud can go ahead with the lantern."

"Not much," interposed the big fellow vigorously. "I won't stir a step outside of this camp."

"You stand by the opening, Byer, with the axe and I will swing the door back. You must be quick and knock it over when it comes in, or it might get by us and tackle Dud."

"You shan't open that door," said Dud, and the boys saw that he meant business.

"All right," responded Byer. "I don't see but what we will have to camp here all night."

"Very well, we'll do that, if necessary, but we won't take any chances with wild animals."

At this moment Raymond approached the camp and pounded vigorously on the door.

"Open up there, fellows!" he shouted.

"How are you, boys?" he said, as he entered the camp after Ned had lifted the latch.

"Well, we had given up all hopes of seeing you here tonight," responded Byer.

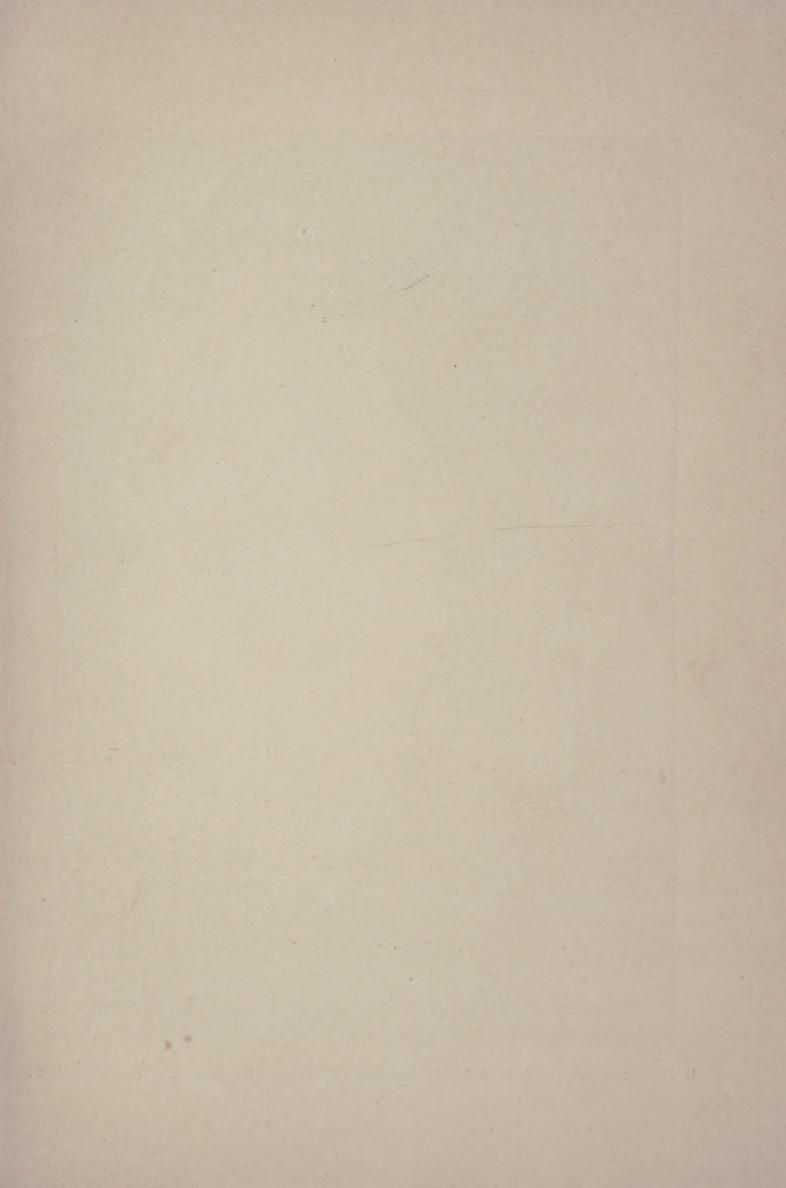
"Did you see anything of a wild animal round the camp when you came along?" asked Ned.

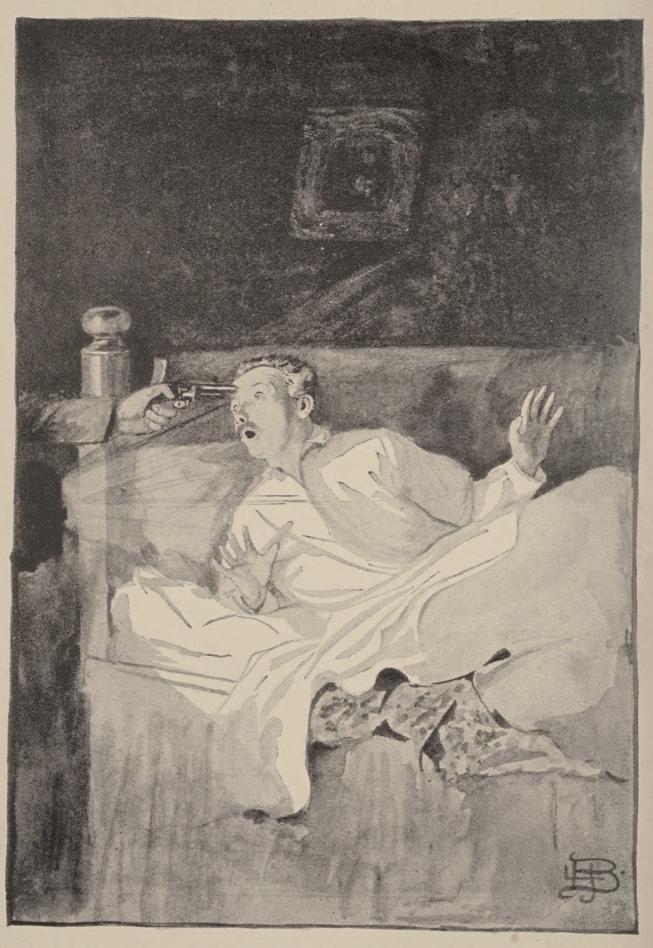
"Not a thing."

"Well, Dud thinks it was an Indian devil. It kicked up considerable racket around here."

"Perhaps Raymond can tell us something about it," said Dud, looking at him supiciously.

"I certainly have seen no wild animal about here tonight," said Raymond with such an honest air of surprise that Dud





"THE MUZZLE OF A REVOLVER PRESSED AGAINST HIS FOREHEAD" (Page 101)

mentally concluded that he had been wholly wrong in his surmises and that a genuine catamount had paid a visit to the camp. This opinion was confirmed upon their return home, when Raymond showed him by the light of the lantern under a scrubby fir the remains of a sheep, which had evidently been killed and partially devoured there. None of the boys saw fit to tell him, however, that it had been the work of a dog which had subsequently paid the penalty of his misdemeanor with his life.

Byer and Raymond slept together in the latter's room, while Dud occupied a small room upon the opposite side of the house. So terrified had he been by his visit to the camp, that he begged Ned to stay with him all night, and the latter, at a nod from Raymond, consented to do so.

About one o'clock in the morning Dud, whose sleep had been disturbed by dreams of Indian devils, was awakened by somebody moving about in his room. Straightening up in bed, and rubbing his eyes to assure himself that he was really awake, he was amazed to see by the light of a dark lantern which they carried two masked men busily engaged in examining his possessions. The window was open and the top of a ladder protruding through it showed how they had gained an entrance to the room. Both men were roughly dressed and wore black cambric masks. The sight of them was terrifying to Dud. He felt the cold sweat start from every pore. He was about to shout, when the lantern was suddenly flashed in his face. He felt the muzzle of a revolver pressed against his forehead, and a hoarse voice hissed in his ear:

"Not a sound, or I'll blow your brains out. Where are the bonds?"

[&]quot;What bonds?" gasped Dud in a terrified whisper.

"The government bonds you've been hoarding up."

"Yes, and those railroad stocks," interposed the second burglar fiercely.

"But I never owned any bonds or railroad stocks in my life!" insisted Dud, his amazement getting the better of his fright.

"See here, you gilded money king, don't try to deceive us," said the first burglar sternly.

"Yes, you bloated bond holder, you might just as well disgorge," added his companion.

"For heaven's sake, gentlemen, don't shoot," pleaded Dud, tremulously. "I'm telling you the honest truth. I haven't but five dollars in the world. It's in my pants pocket. Please take it and go."

"Shall we believe him, Jake?" asked the first burglar.

"I guess we'll have to," was the response.

"See here," continued the first burglar, "do you intend to keep quiet while we leave here?"

"Ye-e-e-s."

"Well, see that you do. It would be very annoying to have to come back and slice your windpipe."

"I won't say a word."

"Well, see that you don't."

"Won't you please leave me my clothes, gentlemen?"

"What do you say, Jake?"

"No, we can't think of it. We want them to wrap the five dollars in."

"Are they all you have?" asked burglar number one.

"Yes, all I've got here."

"Oh, well, you can lie in bed a day or two while they make you some new ones," said Jake. "A gruel diet would be good for your trouble." A subdued groan was Dud's only response.

When the burglars had crowded his property into an ancient carpet bag which they carried, they climbed out of the window and disappeared down the ladder.

As soon as they were out of sight Dud found his voice.

"Help! Murder! Robbers!" he shouted in stentorian tones.

"Here, wake up! What's the trouble with you?" asked Ned, rolling over and giving him a punch in the ribs.

"I've been robbed. Burglars have been here."

"Nonsense, man! You've been dreaming."

"No, I hav'n't, either. There were two burglars in here not more than a minute ago, and they've taken everything I had."

"Why didn't you yell?"

"How could I when one of them kept a revolver at my head?"

"How often do you have these nightmares?"

"I tell you it wasn't a nightmare. I've been robbed."

"Let me see," said Ned, as he jumped from the bed. "I don't find any trace of them," he added, as he groped his way to the door, which was partially ajar, and from which he presently returned on his hands and knees with a bundle, the contents of which he carefully spread out on the chair where Dud had placed his clothes before retiring for the night.

"What's all this noise about?" shouted Mr. Benson from the foot of the stairs.

"I've been robbed," answered Dud. "Burglars have been here."

"Burglars? Nonsense!" said the old gentleman impatiently as, light in hand, he entered the room. "You must have been dreaming. Better lie on your right side the rest of the night."

"I tell you I wasn't dreaming," answered Dud indignantly.
"I was never wider awake in my life. There were certainly two burglars here, and they lugged off all my clothes."

"Where did you leave your clothes when you went to bed?"

"On that chair."

"Well, here they are now."

"My clothes?" gasped Dud incredulously.

"Yes, your clothes, my boy. You have probably had a nightmare. Now turn over on your side, forget all about it and go to sleep," and Mr. Benson shut the door, leaving Dud greatly mystified, but not convinced.

Before descending the stairs he looked in for a moment on Raymond and Byer, but both were snoring soundly, apparently oblivious of the commotion which Dud had created. No sooner had Mr. Benson entered his own room, however, than a vast change came over them. Their snores ceased, and they rolled upon the bed in perfect paroxysms of laughter.

"Did you ever see the beat of that?" gasped Raymond.

"Never. It's lucky Dud has got his growth, or we'd certainly have scared him out of it."

"What did you do with that ladder?"

"I threw it down on the ground after we got in here."

"Well, we must get up before grandfather does and carry it back to the stable."

"What shall we say to Dud tomorrow?"

"Laugh at him, and call it a nightmare."

"I shall never forget how he shook when I had that old revolver at his head," said Byer, breaking into another laugh at the remembrance. "The fellow was just about frightened out of his wits."

"Ned got those clothes back in good shape. I heard

grandfather say they were in the chair. I don't suppose Dud will talk of anything else but this for the next month."

But in this Raymond was mistaken. The big fellow had reluctantly, and with no little chagrin, arrived at the conclusion that his experience must have been, after all, a night-mare, and not until some time afterward was he known to refer to it.

For several days after this the boys were too busily employed in the work of the farm to engage in much mischief, even at Dud's expense. The work was hard, and when night came and the chores were done, they were only too glad to go to bed. The big rocks in the front field had all been disposed of along the edge of the county road where grandfather Benson had planned to lay a stretch of wall the following spring. The unsightly holes that remained where they had been blasted were carefully filled with rich soil and the greater portion of the field staked off, to be broken up later on in the fall preparatory for the next season's potato crop.

"Did you know, Mr. Benson, that you will get very few of your apples if you don't look out?" said Byer as they sat at supper the evening before this work was begun.

"Why, so?" was the response.

"Because the apple thieves are as thick and as busy as bees this fall. They made a raid on David Clay's orchard night before last, and got over twenty bushels. Last night they were at Dean Percy's and secured about ten bushels. They are working this neighborhood pretty strongly just at present."

"That last raid was a bad thing for the town," said Dud, who occasionally dropped a dry remark when it was least expected."

"Why so?" asked Byer.

"Dean won't be able to pay his taxes this year."

A hearty laugh ran around the table, in which even grand-father Benson joined.

"We musn't be too hard on Dean, boys," he said. "For all he is such a chronic growler, I've found him a most excellent man and an accommodating neighbor. It is not surprising if he feels the loss of his apples. His orchard is not a large one and apples are bringing high prices this fall."

"Byer's right, though, grandfather," said Raymond. "The thieves will be coming here next. I wish we had a dog."

"I believe I'd a good deal rather have the thieves than the dog," responded grandfather Benson with a grimace. "They wouldn't fill the house full of fleas—that's one thing in their favor."

"I don't understand why you have such a strange prejudice against dogs, grandfather," insisted Raymond. "I believe every farmer ought to keep one—not a cur, of course, but a good blooded, intelligent dog."

"Perhaps so, but I don't like them, and never could. We used to have them on the place here years ago, in fact, were scarcely ever without one till the place came into my hands. Then I gave the last one away, and have never had another. Say what you may, I believe that a dog's fur is the natural home of the flea. There may be dogs without them, but if so it has never been my fortune to see any."

"It would be useless to argue that point with you," laughed Raymond. "I'll tell you what we'll do, though. Byer and I will pitch the little tent in the nursery and stand guard there tonight."

"I guess that would be a good idea," assented grandfather Benson, "but I warn you that it will be pretty cold business for you."

"Oh, we shan't mind that. We'll wrap up warmly."

"You might take mother's oil stove. With that large sheet iron oven on, it will throw out considerable heat; enough to warm your hands by, anyway."

"That's a good idea," assented Raymond.

"Perhaps Dud would like to stand guard with us," suggested Byer slyly.

"Not a bit of it," said the big fellow promptly. "I didn't hire for that kind of work. Apple thieves are pesky desperate fellows when they are driven to close quarters. There's been more than one good man laid out by them in the history of this town, and I, for one, don't intend to take any chances with them."

"That's a good idea, Dud. A small fellow like you wouldn't stand much show," said Raymond.

"There's one Indian chief you should have been named for, Dud," added Byer.

"Who is that?"

"Young-man-afraid-of-his-shadow," was the response, at which Byer and Raymond laughed immoderately.

Dud made no reply to this pointed allusion to his timidity, but picked up a milk pail and started for the barn. "Those fellows make me the butt of all their sport," he muttered. "Perhaps I deserve to be laughed at, though. I know I'm a coward, but not so big a one, perhaps, as they think I am. I'm pretty well convinced in my mind that those burglars were none other than Raymond Benson and Byer Ames. If I don't get even with them for that little prank, my name isn't Dudley Rich," and the big fellow slammed the barn door behind him with a force that showed a settled resolution on his part to turn the tables, if possible, upon his tormentors.

"I wouldn't be so hard on Dudley, boys," said grandfather Benson when the object of his remark had left the house. "There's such a thing as carrying your fun too far. He's pretty good natured, and will stand considerable chaffing, but I think he felt hurt at what you just said to him."

"We didn't mean anything, grandfather," said Raymond.

"We were only in sport," added Byer.

"I know that, boys, but some of the cruelest and most cutting things have been said in fun. It is a good plan to avoid sport at the expense of other folks' feelings."

"I never thought Dud was sensitive," said Raymond.

"Well, he's not exceedingly so, but now and then I've thought the sharp points of your banter have penetrated his skin and made him a little sore. You must look out for that, boys. Don't carry your chaffing to excess."

"We'll be more careful in the future, grandfather," said Raymond. "Go up and get my gun, Byer."

"What do you want of that?" interposed Mr. Benson, as he paused in the door way, milk pail in hand.

"To take to the orchard."

"No, boys, that won't do at all. If you watch in the orchard, you must do so without firearms. I have never permitted armed men to stand guard there, and I never will."

"But what if thieves should come there?"

"Shout at them and drive them off. They won't lose any time in getting away when they find they are watched. It's apples they're after, not trouble."

"But what if they should show fight?"

"There won't be the slightest possibility of that if you'll only give them a chance to get away."

"Well, that's what I call pretty tame business," said Raymond in deep disgust. "Here we are to watch in the orchard, and in case a thief comes along all we are permitted to do is to yell at him and scare him away, instead of capturing him."

"That's enough, boys," said grandfather Benson quietly. "All we want to do is to save our apples. Tomorrow I am going to let you two begin gathering them. I never have wanted to hazard life in my orchard. If men have guns in their hands, there is too much chance for accident. A neighbor might be making a cross cut from the back settlement, as they frequently do, and would be sure to be taken for a thief. No, boys, we'll run no chances. If you stay in the orchard tonight, you must leave all your firearms at home."

After some grumbling Raymond and Byer assented to these terms, and a little later had the small A tent pitched in the midst of what was called the nursery. This was a thick clump of small apple trees on a knoll in the upper part of the orchard. Its trees had been raised from the seed, and were the only ones on the farm which grandfather Benson had not grafted. A large space had been cleared in the center of the clump, and here those who watched over the apples had been able to pitch a small tent and have it entirely concealed from view, while from their elevated post of observation they were able to see, on clear nights, all over the orchard, and to hear sounds in any part of it.

When the tent was arranged, and the oil stove, together with a good supply of blankets, had been placed in it, the boys returned to the house and went to bed. It was not necessary for them to begin their vigils before midnight. Apple thieves were never known to start in before that hour,

where an orchard was so near the house as was that of Mr. Benson. The boys were thus enabled to secure several hours of good sleep before they began their watch. Grandfather Benson consented to sit up till twelve o'clock and wake them then. Before that he agreed to take a turn or two through the orchard himself to make sure that no one got the start of them. With these details arranged the boys were soon fast asleep in Raymond's den.

CHAPTER VIII.

A NIGHT IN THE ORCHARD.

"Well, this is what I call rather frosty business,' grumbled Byer, as he and Raymond stamped up and down the nursery knoll a few hours later. "I almost believe that men who stay out nights like these to steal apples, earn them."

"Probably a less amount of work in some honest business would enable them to buy more apples," returned Raymond. "It isn't altogether the apples those fellows want, though," he added. "There's a kind of fascination for them in the excitement of the thing."

"Well, we sha'n't be able to fascinate them very much if they come here tonight," said Byer in a tone of disappointment. "All we could do would be to yell at them and I doubt very much if they would find anything very hair-lifting in our voices. Now if we only had our guns along we could give them some excitement of the real, genuine variety."

"That's so, Byer," assented Raymond, "but I rather guess grandfather was right, after all. It would be a dangerous thing for us to have guns in our hands here in case some neighbor should be cutting across lots. Besides, all we want are the apples, and tomorrow you and I will gather the ones most exposed to thieves."

"Shouldn't you think the officers would look closer after these fellows?"

"Well, I don't know. There's very little financial inducement for them to do so, and, besides, these thieves spread their depredations over such a large territory that it's pretty hard to trap them. On night, you see, they are at Mr. Clay's, away in the southwest corner of the town and the very next night they turn up at Dean Percy's, in nearly the opposite corner. Tonight they may be in Bodge or Bolton. I haven't very much idea that we shall see anything of them here. We live too near Percy."

"Yes, I'm inclined to believe this night's work won't count us much," said Byer, "but one thing is certain. We'll find the apples here when we commence gathering tomorrow."

"I don't believe we shall get a very early start, the way I feel now," yawned Raymond. "I believe I can sleep right through till night after I'm once in bed."

"We ought to get to work right after dinner; that would give us plenty of time for sleep."

"Let's go into the tent and see how much that oil stove will thaw us out."

Byer eagerly acceded to this suggestion and the two boys entered the tent.

Scarcely were they out of sight before the dark form of a man stole softly along the fence on the lower edge of the orchard. He was a big strapping fellow and evidently came to the orchard prepared for business. Under his arm he carried a large meal sack and over his shoulder a long pole. He was soon lost to sight among the trees in the upper part of the orchard.

"I declare, that stove isn't much better than nothing at all,"

said Raymond, as he and Byer emerged, shortly after, from the tent and stood again upon the knoll.

"It will make things swelter in a summer kitchen," returned Byer, "but it isn't calculated to warm all out doors; that's what it practically amounts to in the tent."

"Hark!" exclaimed Raymond abruptly. "Did you hear that noise up there in the orchard? There's someone there, Byer, just as sure as you live," he added excitedly.

Both boys listened with breathless intentness. Very distinctly upon the night air came the sound of someone busily at work in the upper part of the orchard. The boys could hear the vigorous whacks of his pole among the branches of the trees and the thump of the apples as they fell upon the ground.

"It's a thief, sure's the world," said Byer in a whisper tremulous with excitement.

"Yes, and he's getting in some heavy work," returned Raymond. "Oh, if we only had a gun. Had we better sing out at him?"

"I should say not."

"So should I. We want to catch him. We'll steal upon him unawares and take him prisoner. Wouldn't grandfather Benson's eyes stick out, though, when we brought him in. Just think of it."

"See here, Raymond," said Byer nervously, "let's not be rash. I don't want to come to close quarters with those fellows. There may be a half a dozen of them and they are probably armed."

"I don't think from the noise that there's more than one," answered Raymond. "If that's the case, two strong fellows like you and me ought to take care of him. We can creep

up and see just what the situation is. If there's more than one, we'll only yell at them and scare them off; but if that fellow's alone, as I think he is, we'll take him into limbo."

"Don't do anything rash, Raymond."

"I promise you I won't; but I don't want to miss this opportunity. Are you scared, Byer?"

"Not a bit of it. If we are going to have a fight, I'm in for my share of it; but I don't want to get into a scrimmage where we are sure to get licked."

"I'm no more anxious to do that than you are, Byer. We'll look out for that."

With this cautious determination the boys stole softly toward the upper part of the orchard. As they advanced, the operations of the thief became more audible. He was pounding about with his pole in a most energetic manner, and was evidently determined to make the most of his opportunity.

As the boys came closer to him they dropped upon their hands and knees and crept cautiously behind the trees. Soon they came within sight of the thief. He was a large, powerfully built fellow and the boys viewed his ample proportions and vigorous movements with not a few misgivings.

"He's a tough one," whispered Byer. "I tell you we are going to have our hands full if we tackle him."

"The two of us can handle him," returned Raymond confidently. "When we jump on him we want to come to close quarters at once and clinch with him, one of us on each side and behind him, if possible."

Just then the moon broke from behind a cloud and shone upon the man's face. It was as black as ebony.

"Great Scott! It's a negro," whispered Byer in amaze-

ment. "I don't know where he could have come from. There isn't a colored family in town."

"Very likely he's from Bolton. There are a number of negro families there. I'm inclined to think he won't give us as much trouble as a white man."

"Why not?"

"He won't have as much backbone."

"I don't know. You take a colored criminal and he's mighty apt to be a tough customer and unpleasantly handy with a knife."

"Yes, some of them are, but the average negro thief is one of the biggest cowards in the world. It doesn't take much to drive him into his shoes, which are generally big enough to hold him."

"We shall want to pound this fellow on the shins," added Byer. That's the tender spot."

While this conversation had been going on in subdued whispers the apple thief had been making good use of his time. With vigorous thrusts of the pole he knocked the big apples upon the ground and, picking them up, stowed them away in the bag.

"It's lucky he struck that brier tree," whispered Raymond.
"It's just above the new nodhead tree, and grandfather is very particular about the apples on that. He will want them gathered with considerable more care than this fellow is using."

"Let's go slowly," cautioned Byer. "When he shoulders that bag of apples and attempts to walk off with them he will have about all he can take care of. That will be the time for us to close in on him."

"That's so," assented Raymond.

In a few minutes the thief had completed his work. Care-

fully tying up the mouth of the sack, he threw it lightly over his shoulder and started with it in the direction of the road. This was the opportunity that Raymond and Byer had been waiting for. Dashing from their concealment, they bore down upon him with all possible speed, but before they could close with him a most unexpected thing occurred. Dashing his bag of apples to the ground, the thief turned upon them with startling rapidity. In a twinkling he had thrown Raymond upon the ground, and piled Byer on top of him. Then he calmly sat down upon them and held them there, despite their most frantic and furious struggles. The boys were perfectly powerless in his strong grasp.

During this vigorous action the thief had not spoken a word. So utterly unexpected had his movements been to the boys, who had been entirely confident of taking him by surprise, that they could scarcely credit their senses when they found themselves completely in his power. They were not the ones, however, to give up such a contest without a desperate struggle. They kicked and twisted and squirmed in a most vigorous and determined manner, but all to no purpose. They were as pigmies in the iron grasp of the black giant who sat astride them. At last, panting from exhaustion, they gave up the struggle, but as soon as they could find their voices they used them most vociferously.

"Help! Murder! Help!" they shouted in frantic tones.

This procedure on their part did not appear to disconcert their captor in the least, nor did he make the slightest attempt to stop their cries. Indeed a dry chuckle which he gave indicated that he derived no little satisfaction from their sorry plight. No reply came to their cries and as a last resort they were forced to parley with their captor. "What are you going to do with us?" demanded Raymond, but his question received no answer.

"You're not going to keep us here all night, are you?" asked Byer, but he was no more successful than his companion in getting their captor to talk.

"Perhaps he's deaf and dumb," suggested Raymond.

"Well, he acts that way."

"If he is, we're in a decided fix. I'm in a most uncomfortable position just at present."

"So am I."

"Let me see if I can't open his ears. He's evidently holding us here for a ransom. See here, my good fellow," addressing the negro in a coaxing tone. "You have got the best of us. The fight was fair and square. We acknowledge ourselves licked. The prize was that bag of apples. You've won it. Now take it and go. We'll promise not to molest you or call for help."

For the first time the negro spoke.

"Well, that's perfectly satisfactory, boys, and mighty generous besides," he said in a very familiar voice, as he arose from his prisoners and picked up his bag of apples again.

Raymond and Byer regained their feet and stood staring at him in speechless amazement, half convinced that their ears had deceived them. They were completely dumbfounded. A voice from the dead could not have astounded them more. At length they found their voices.

"Dud Rich!" they gasped in chorus.

"At your service, boys," responded the big fellow with a burst of laughter so loud and hearty that it seemed to fill the whole orchard, and woke a thousand echoes in the cedar swamp beyond the ridge.

"Well, I'm dished!" ejaculated Raymond, when he had assured himself beyond a doubt of Dud's identity.

"You may knock me down with a feather!" added Byer.

"Didn't have any suspicions who it was, did you?" grinned Dud, who evidently enjoyed the situation hugely.

"Not the slightest," confessed Raymond frankly. "If you'd been the Old Nick himself you couldn't have astonished me more.

"You've duped us completely. I'll acknowledge the corn," admitted Byer with a crestfallen air.

"What surprises me most of all, Dud, is to find you so far away from home at this hour of night," said Raymond.

"I really believe I could have gone through fire and flood tonight, if it had been necessary, to get the under hold on you boys," laughed Dud good naturedly. "I'll admit I'm naturally nervous. I've tried to overcome it, but I can't. It's a silly thing, I know, and I deserve to be laughed at. You fellows rasped me a little too hard after supper, though. It stung a little, and I made up my mind to get the bulge on you if it took a leg. After you had gone out here to the orchard this plan came to me. I took some corks and burned them and blacked my face with them. Then I got this sack and bamboo pole and stole up here into the orchard. I selected the old brier tree because it was a good distance from the nursery, and I should do no damage to it in my work. My gracious! but didn't it make me laugh when I saw you fellows creeping up and playing the scout on me. I knew pretty well, though, that you wouldn't close in on me until I shouldered the apples and started off with them, so I was all prepared to drop them at the proper time. When you dashed after me I had an eye on you, and about the time you got within reach I slid those apples off my shoulder just as slick as a greased pig and fastened on to you. I expected quite a tussle with you, but I did you up so easily, it astonished me almost as much as it did you. I thought I should die laughing when I was holding you down there; but I had to keep in. I knew very well that you would recognize my voice just as soon as you heard it. Oh, but you two are great fighters, you are!" and the big fellow laughed heartily at the thought of his easy victory.

"I don't know, Dud," said Raymond in no little chagrin.
"I think we made a good fight under the circumstances. We were taken by surprise, and besides, everyone says you are the strongest man in town."

"Well, I guess we had better call it even, hadn't we?"

"Even on what?" demanded Byer.

"That little burglar joke you played on me. I'll confess I was terribly scared by it."

"What did we have to do with that affair?" asked Raymond, endeavoring to appear innocent.

"You and Byer had everything to do with it, and I'll admit you did it well," responded Dud confidently.

"You won't say anything about tonight's business, that's a good fellow, will you?" said Raymond in a coaxing attempt to change the subject.

"I'll not, on just one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you and Byer will never say anything about the burglar affair."

"It's agreed," was the prompt response, and the three boys shook hands heartily over the compact.

As they neared the house they met grandfather Benson coming toward them with a lantern in his hand.

"Why, what does this mean?" he inquired in apparent surprise, as he surveyed the group. "Who have you captured, boys?"

"Oh, a colored man we found stealing apples in the orchard."

"Well, well, I declare. He comes along quietly, doesn't he? My sakes! Is that you, Dudley? How in the world came you out here at this time of night in that plight? Been masquerading on the boys, hey?"

"Yes, just a bit," grinned Dud.

"Well, there's no need of watching any longer. We had all better go to bed," and Mr. Benson led the way to the house, his round sides shaking now and then with suppressed laughter.

"Dud Rich isn't at the bottom of this night's fun, depend upon it," said Raymond, as he and Byer lay in bed in the den.

"Who is?"

"Grandfather Benson."

"But Dud won't lie, and you know he said it was his plan."

"No, he said the plan came to him, and you may be sure that grandfather was the one who brought it. Dud would never have thought of it in the world."

"I guess you must be mistaken. I don't believe Mr. Benson would have a hand in such a prank."

"Yes, he would, too. He's just as much a boy at heart as any of us. I can tell you that he has enjoyed this night's fun a good deal more than Dud is able to."

"What makes you think Mr. Benson is at the bottom of this business?"

"A number of things. In the first place, Dud isn't smart enough to think of such a joke, and, in the second place, he hasn't courage enough to carry it out alone, and no amount of chaffing on our part could nerve him up to it. I am convinced by the bold way Dud went about his work that grandfather planned the whole thing for him, and that he was waiting for him all the time in the lower part of the orchard. How he must have snickered when he heard us yelling for help."

"But I can't believe your grandfather would take part in a joke like that," persisted Byer.

"Yes, he would, too. Grandfather is as good a man as ever lived, but he is a very poor actor. His conduct when he met us tonight betrayed him completely. Don't you suppose he'd been considerably more flustrated if we'd brought in a real thief? Of course he would. He took matters altogether too calmly tonight. His attempt to appear surprised was terribly far fetched; besides that, did you notice how quickly he recognized Dud? Do you suppose he'd been so discerning if he hadn't been in the joke? Not a bit of it."

"Well, if he was the one who planned the thing, it only evens us up with Dud. I think we'd better keep pretty still about the whole matter, don't you?"

"Most decidedly I do," was Raymond's hearty rejoinder, and in a few minutes both boys were fast asleep.

It may be well to say right here that the boys were correct in surmising that Dud's bold, and successful practical joke had been inspired by grandfather Benson.

"It's too bad," he had thought, as he followed the big fellow to the barn, "that those boys impose upon Dudley so. He's altogether too good natured. If he'd only show a little

temper now and then, they wouldn't pester him nearly so much, or, what's better, if he could only get a good sharp joke on them, they'd have four times the respect for him. "H'm," he mused, as an idea came to him. "Why can't he black up and play robber tonight. He is able to handle both of the boys with perfect ease, and may be depended on not to get mad or hurt either of them."

The good man kept his own counsel, but no sooner were the boys on their way to the orchard than he went to Dud's room, and waking him, informed him of the joke which he had planned. The big fellow could scarcely credit his senses. He half believed himself to be dreaming, and felt obliged to rub his eyes and pinch himself for assurance that such was not the case, and that he was really awake. The spectacle of grandfather Benson planning a practical joke upon Raymond and Byer was one that the widest stretches of his imagination would never have reached to.

"Are you really in earnest?" he gasped, when he had recovered somewhat from his amazement.

"I was never more so in my life. If you want to put an effective stop to the banter of those boys you will have to play such a joke on them as will offset the one they played on you the other night. I've been turning that affair over in my mind and I am firmly convinced that they were the burglars who disturbed your slumbers, and that the Grover boy was a party to the prank. I confess, though, they played it pretty well on the whole of us. I really thought at the time that you had had a nightmare."

"I thought so myself for a while, but I made up my mind the next afternoon that it was Raymond and Byer. I had the stable ladder the day before on the upper mow. The next time I fed the horses it was on the lower mow. The doors were locked and I knew very well that no strangers had been there. If there had been, they wouldn't have known where to look for that ladder. Raymond and Byer couldn't have had any use for it that day, and I knew very well that neither of them had been in the stable chamber since breakfast. The matter puzzled me for a while, but at last I began to see through it, and became convinced that the fellows I took to be burglars were really those two boys."

"You are doubtless right in that conclusion," said Mr. Benson. "Now you have a splendid chance to pay them back in their own coin and you mustn't miss it."

"But I don't believe I want to go up there alone tonight," said Dud with an apprehensive shiver.

"Nonsense, Dudley, there's nobody there but the boys. You are not afraid of them, are you?"

"No, but -"

"But what?"

"It's terrible dark up there."

"Darkness never hurt any man; but if you feel nervous I'll go to the lower edge of the orchard and wait within call for you."

"All right, I'll go," said Dud eagerly, satisfied with this practical relief to his fears. He was nothing loath to have it out with the boys in their own line of humor. He entered with keen zest into the preparations for his visit to the orchard, and when they were completed, grandfather Benson assured him that neither of the boys would recognize him. When they parted at the foot of the orchard Mr. Benson urged Dud to make the joke a complete success by playing his part boldly. How well he carried out his instructions our readers already know.

Raymond and Byer looked a little sheepish the following day at dinner, which was the first meal they were up in time for; but neither grandfather Benson nor Dud made any reference to the affair of the preceding night. The boys accepted the truce thus delicately offered, and from that time forth the apple thief and Dud's burglars were persons never referred to.

About a week later the stage from the Corner stopped at the house to leave some packages, and Raymond, who went out to take them, was surprised to find among the passengers Mr. David Beecham. He was somewhat undecided at first just how to meet him. This question was quickly solved by the teacher. He held out his hand very cordially to Raymond with a hearty "Good morning."

"Good morning, Mr. Beecham. Aren't you a good ways from school?"

"Yes, quite a ways, but this is my vacation time. The term is closed."

"Why, I thought it kept two weeks longer," said Raymond in surprise.

"Well, that was the original intention, but the money didn't hold out. Some of those who subscribed failed to pay, and it was found necessary to cut the term short."

"Will you teach at the Corner again?"

"Probably not. I graduate from college next June, and shall begin the study of law. I have probably closed my career as a teacher."

"Mr. Beecham," said Raymond earnestly, "I want to ask your pardon for my outrageous conduct this term. There was no excuse for it. I have none to offer. I only wonder at your forbearance."

"That is all right, Raymond," responded Mr. Beecham,

much affected. "I never laid up your mischief against you, for I always felt that your heart was in the right place. If I can ever be of service to you in the future, I trust you will believe me your friend and will not hesitate to call upon me."

"I certainly shall. I could have no stronger proof of it

than you have just given."

The two shook hands warmly, and Raymond watched the stage disappear over the hill with a feeling of relief from the burdens of conscience that he had not experienced since he left the High School.

CHAPTER IX.

NOAH GRIFFIN'S REFORMATION.

RAYMOND and Byer found the work of gathering apples much more congenial than that of hauling rocks, and were only too glad to devote their energies to it while grandfather Benson and Dud were engaged in breaking up the front field.

The apples were picked up in bushel baskets and carried on a wheelbarrow to the large, dry cellar under the ell, where they were carefully sorted and stored away in different bins. Grandfather Benson took great pride in his orchard, which was one of the finest in the county. All its fruit was of the best grafted varieties, and he had never failed to secure the lion's share of the premiums in the pomological exhibit at the annual county fair. He was very careful to avoid bruising the fruit in gathering it, and the result was that he always found a ready market for all he had to sell, and could easily have disposed of many times as much as he raised. The orchard was the greatest single source of profit on the farm, and Raymond and Byer took plenty of time to secure its fruit in first class condition. They had Raymond's double barrelled shot gun with them where they worked, and were able to carry on a considerable work of destruction among the chipmunks and red squirrels that infested the orchard.

Not far from the Benson farm lived a man named Noah

Griffin, who bore the reputation among Chestnut people of being one of the most shiftless men in the county. His farm, notwithstanding the many granite boulders that dotted its surface, was one of the most productive in town, and had it been properly cultivated might have brought its owner excellent returns. Noah Griffin, however, had a strange faculty of always doing things at the wrong time and never doing anything thoroughly. His breaking up was usually done so late in the fall that it was shut off by the early frosts before it was completed, thus going over to retard the labors of the following spring. He was generally the last man in Chestnut to get his crops into the ground, and the last to harvest them.

He spent time and money enough in repairing worn out farm vehicles and implements to have purchased several full sets of new ones. More labor had been expended by him in patching up the leaky roofs of his farm buildings than would have been required to shingle them newly twice over. He never thought of doing any work upon his fences until his cattle were running loose in the road, and then his favorite method of closing the breach was to fill it with brush. As a result of this shiftless way of doing things the Griffin place had long presented a neglected and dilapidated appearance. Noah's farming implements were strewn in promiscuous confusion about the premises. The door-yard was his favorite place of storage. It was never without a variagated collection of ox yokes, carts, drags, rakes, axes, ploughs, harrows-in fact, there was scarcely anything about the place that did not figure there at some time during the year.

Noah's house was of a pattern very familiar in the early days of the county, and even now to be found there in certain localities. It had originally been built by one of the

settlers upon—as Raymond Benson expressed it,—"the plan of a shoe box," with a roof of low slant. When the needs of a growing family demanded more room, an addition was built upon one side of it with a shed roof in continuation of the house, reaching down to within ten feet of the ground. The two chimneys which the structure boasted were in the old part of the house, above whose moss-grown shingles they lifted but a few feet of blackened bricks and mortar. As may be imagined, few changes had been made in the place after it came into the possession of Noah Griffin. To him its most attractive spot was the large open fire-place in the front sitting room. He loved dearly to sit in his stocking feet before its cheerful blaze, toasting his pedal extremities and drawing immeasurable inspiration from a short black pipe, which was the inseparable companion of the clock upon the mantelpiece.

It was, doubtless, the fact that the cares of life rested lightly upon Noah's broad shoulders that gave him an abundance of time to proclaim the evils of the age. Be that as it may, his favorite pastime was to sit upon one of the nail kegs in Squire Copeland's store, chew immense quantities of tobacco and bemoan the hard life that farmers were forced to live. To prosperity in any form he was irrevokably opposed. He appeared to regard those who had exchanged honest industry for a well-to do condition in life as the enemies of mankind. They were always, to his mind, "bloated 'ristocrats," and he was very fond of assuring those who would listen to him that the time would come when down-trodden laboring men like himself would rebel against the tyranny of capital, the unjust distribution of wealth that was forever grinding them upon the ragged edge of life. Then, he predicted, would come

such a revulsion of feeling, such a mighty shaking up of affairs, such an outpouring of the righteous indignation of the oppressed masses—whom he conceived to be a great army of Noah Griffins,—as would break down the artificial barriers of wealth and give to every man, woman and child an equal share in the good things of life. This was the golden era to which Noah looked forward with hopeful anticipation. In the meantime he managed to bear up under the grievous burdens of a social system founded upon industry, through the solace he sucked from his venerable pipe, and the inspiration he derived from occasional visits to the home of Pete Atkins.

On one occasion Noah had ventured to give expression to a few of his theories in open town meeting, when the question of offering exemption from taxation to a proposed woolen mill was under discussion. He had warmed to his subject as he dilated upon the inequalities with which "we laborin' men" were forced to contend. Why, he demanded, should those of them who toiled early and late to scrape together a mean, ignoble livelihood, a subsistence unworthy of American citizenship, be forced to contribute from their scanty earnings to the prosperity of a grasping and bloated corporation? Why, indeed! As Noah proceeded with his remarks, his voice assumed a stentorian pitch. With fiery invective he denounced the tyrannical operations of the "money barons" who, not satisfied with securing pretty much all the property in the world, were savagely determined to rake into their already bursting coffers the very victuals from the poor man's table.

At this interesting point in his remarks the frowzy head of a small boy appeared at a window in the rear of the hall, and a shrill voice shouted, "Mr. Griffin, your cattle's in the pound." A burst of uproarious laughter followed this announcement, during which Noah lost the thread of his discourse and sat down very much flustered and exceedingly red in the face.

Notwithstanding this humiliating collapse of his oratorical effort, there was balm-of-gilead for Noah in the fact that the proposition to exempt was defeated by a small vote, although it was strongly supported by Andrew Benson, whose opinions usually prevailed in town affairs.

The new woolen mill was therefore established in the adjoining town of Bodge, which voted the exemption. A thriving community grew up about it, and many Chestnut citizens moved there to obtain employment, carrying with them a large amount of property. The following year the tax rate was reduced in Bodge and advanced in Chestnut. Notwithstanding these facts, Noah always maintained that he had saved his town from a heavy loss of taxes, and by his timely grasp of the situation had forever snatched it from the clutches of corporate power.

Noah's better half, Matilda Griffin, was a tall raw-boned woman who had been accustomed for many years to perform a large amount of the work that, in the usual division of labor, would have fallen upon her liege lord. She was an energetic soul, and it was chiefly to her untiring industry that she and Noah were always comfortably dressed and had enough to eat. Matilda—or Tilly, as she was familiarly called by her acquaintances,—was not a woman of prepossessing appearance. She was loose-jointed and angular. Her features were thin and sharp, and she had an exceedingly shrill and penetrating voice. She wore her hair in a tight pug on the back of her neck, and was generally clad in a loose print wrapper, from under which protruded a substantial pair of leather slippers.

These, as they had originally been purchased for Noah, were several sizes too large for her. As she went about her household tasks the heels of these commodious articles beat a tattoo upon the floor in accompaniment to her thoughts, and in keeping with the vigor of her movements.

Older citizens of Chestnut remembered her years before as a bright, ambitious girl, of a lively and sunny disposition. Thirty years of married life with Noah Griffin had transformed her into a soured and disappointed woman, prematurely old. Life had, indeed, few pleasures for her. As she grew older she became a firm believer in spiritualism and appeared to extract some comfort from this faith. Although Noah was naturally a superstitious man, with a profound trust in many signs and omens, he had heaped no end of ridicule upon his wife for what he termed her "nonsensical notions"; but he was unable to shake her faith. She declared, with no little vehemence, that what she knew she knew, and nothing anyone could say would make the slightest difference with her. As she was not a specially agreeable companion when in a contentious mood, Noah had gradually come to make less comment upon her faith in spiritualism. He was also impelled to this course by a haunting fear that, after all, she might be right. In view of such a possibility he concluded that silence might prove in the long run to be golden, and cautiously held his peace.

It was no little aggravation to Raymond and Byer, upon returning to the orchard from dinner one day, to find Noah's cattle within the enclosure, engaged in a very active work of destruction. A basket of choice nodheads, from a small tree in which grandfather Benson felt a special pride, was overturned, and such of the fruit as had not been eaten was so badly bitten and trampled upon as to be worthless.

"I declare!" exclaimed Raymond angrily. "There can never be any bars down or gates left open in this town but Noah Griffin's cattle are sure to sneak through and get into mischief. Here they've spoiled the very best nodheads in the orchard. Grandfather was going to select the ones for the county fair from that very basket. Any man who can't keep his cattle out of the highways ought not to be allowed to have any."

"I'll fix them," responded Byer as he picked up the shot gun.

"What are you going to do?" asked Raymond hastily.

"I'm going to give these cattle a dose of something warming."

"No, you're not."

"Why not?"

"Because it would be a mean and cowardly act. You'll say so, too, Byer, if you'll think a minute. These cattle are not to blame for running the roads; it's the fault of their owner, who is too lazy to keep his fences in decent repair. Any cattle would run the road as much as these do, if they had as good a chance."

"I guess you're right, Raymond," responded Byer, whose anger was rapidly cooling. "Noah's the one who ought to be shot; it would be mean to hurt his cattle. I declare, though, I haven't any patience with that man. He's the most shiftless, good for nothing fellow I know of. Why, he's actually spent time enough making pokes and blinds for cattle not in the least breachy to have built a fence as good as your grandfather's three times round his farm. I vow he deserves to be ridden out of town on a rail."

"He is a worthless fellow, Byer, that's a fact, and perhaps we can find a way to convince him of it."

"No, you couldn't do that. He has altogether too good an opinion of himself; he knows too much to work," said Byer disgustedly.

"There's truth in what you say," replied Raymond, as he drove the last offending cow into the road and closed the gate behind her. "I have an idea in mind, though, that may be of service in letting Noah hear the voice of public opinion.

"What's that?"

"Let's finish gathering these apples and I'll show you. I think we can get through by three o'clock, and that will give us till supper time to develop my plan."

The boys set to work with a will and by the middle of the afternoon had the last basketful of apples safely stowed away in the cellar. When this had been done Raymond led the way to the workshop in the shed connecting the ell of the house with the stable.

"Now what?" queried Byer, whose curiosity was considerably excited to learn the method by which Raymond proposed to give Noah Griffin a knowledge of what his neighbors thought of him.

"Well, the first thing, Byer, will be for you to take this axe and go to the swamp. Cut down a sapling maple with a trunk as nearly round as you can find, and from three to three and one half inches in diameter. Bring me a piece of it from next the stump, about two feet long."

"I don't see what you can want of that," said Byer, as he swung the axe over his shoulder.

"I'll show you when you get back."

"Well, I can't imagine what it can be," was Byer's mystified response, as he started toward the swamp.

When he had gone, Raymond pulled from under the work

bench a large box which had long been used as a receptacle for a miscellaneous collection of odds and ends. After rumaging about among its contents for awhile, he pulled from it a long piece of rubber hose which had formerly done duty on a force pump. This he viewed with no little satisfaction.

"I thought I couldn't be mistaken about seeing this here," he soliloquized. "It will be exactly what we want. There must be nearly twenty feet of it and this hole near the end seems to be the only one in it. I guess I'll cut this lower part off; it must be air tight for my purposes—there, I think that will fill the bill."

In a short time Byer returned from the swamp with a handsome straight maple stick about three inches and a half in diameter.

"Will that do?" he asked, as he laid it on the bench.

"Yes, that's exactly what I wanted. Now, Byer, I wish you'd put that in the vise and saw the end off squarely; then bore a hole in it about three inches deep with the two inch auger. You must be sure and get the hole in the center. Place the point of your auger in the pith of the stick."

"I begin to see why you wanted a green stick," said Byer, as he followed Raymond's directions. "You were afraid of splitting a dry one."

"That's it, exactly. I've tried it a number of times, and you are almost sure of splitting a dry stick of this size when you bore so large a hole in the end of it. There is seldom any trouble, though, with a green stick."

"Where did you ever see any work like this done?"

"At Amos Dole's lumber camp last winter. The men used to bore out green sticks and make them into the shape of barrels; then they would fill them up with spruce gum and put in heads of thoroughly seasoned wood. When the green wood dried it shrunk and held these heads very firmly in place. Some of the men had a number of these neat little barrels of gum stored away. They expected to find a very ready market for them at Bangor when they came off the drive in the spring."

"But you are not going to make barrels, are you?"

"No, I didn't say I was. I only told you where I had seen work of this kind done before."

"What next?" asked Byer, with a puzzled air, as he pulled the auger from the hole he had bored.

"Well, now you may take the three quarters inch auger, center it upon the bottom of the hole you have just finished, and bore another five inches deep."

"Why, that will be a wooden tunnel."

"Precisely. That's just what we are going to make—two wooden tunnels."

"I don't see what use you can have for them."

"I'll show you pretty soon. The first tunnel you may leave on the inside just as it was bored; the second one you may rim out about the mouth, on the plan of a tin tunnel."

"Then what?"

"Then we'll place the two tunnels in the ends of this hose and have a splendid speaking tube. We can talk into the first tunnel and the second one will throw the voice out in good shape."

"But what will you do with it, after it's all done?"

"You and I will go down to Noah Griffin's with it tonight. We'll take a short mow ladder with us from the barn, and have on an extra pair of stockings. About the time Noah and Tilly are beginning to doze before the open fire, we'll steal up on the roof of the house in our stocking feet, drop this speaking tube into the chimney and give them a spiritualistic seance more weird than anything in that line they have ever dreamed of."

"But don't you suppose they'll see through it?" laughed Byer.

"Not at all. They are altogether too superstitious for that."

"Well, perhaps so; but if they are fooled by this contrivance, they are greener than I think they are."

"If everything works right, we'll have a little sport at Noah's expense, and teach him a useful lesson, beside," said Raymond confidently.

By supper time the boys had their speaking tube completed, and, with a little practice, Raymond developed a voice on it so hollow, lugubrious and long drawn out, that Byer declared might well belong to another world, for it was certainly dolefully different from anything in this.

It was about eight o'clock when the boys finally brought up at Noah's house. They had not dared to defer their visit to a later hour, for Chestnut people retired early, and the Griffins did not differ from their neighbors in this respect. They generally sat before the open fire for a couple of hours after the evening chores were done, and then went to bed.

These short evenings were usually passed in reading, or in discussing the affairs of their neighbors, in which both Noah and Tilly had a lively interest. Each took a newspaper, one a socialist publication after Noah's own heart, the other a spiritualist sheet, which Tilly found quite indispensable. Thus both the religious and secular world were provided for. Outside of these papers, however, the Griffins were not very

extensively supplied with literature. A Testament, a well worn Webster's Dictionary, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, Towne's Fourth Reader, and the Maine Farmer's Almanac, constituted their library. Although the volumes were few, it must be admitted that they were carefully selected, and their begrimmed and thumb-marked pages showed that they had been many times "chewed and digested," in accordance with the famous advice of Lord Bacon—although it is extremely doubtful if either Noah or Tilly had ever heard of such a personage.

On the evening when Raymond and Byer made their visit to the Griffin homestead, Noah and Tilly had finished their chores somewhat earlier than usual. As was customary, the lion's share of the work had fallen upon the good woman. Noah felt that he had done all that could reasonably be expected of him, by getting in the wood and preparing the morrow's kindlings, while his wife did the milking.

He was in a rather more meditative mood than usual, as he toasted his feet before the open fire and blew large puffs of smoke up the chimney from his short black pipe.

"I've bin er thinkin', Tilly," he announced, with impressive slowness, "that it would be er mighty good idee to put er mortgage on this 'ere place 'n git some stock in the Louisiana Development 'n Investment Company. The stock is sellin' at er little over er dollar, now, 'n when it comes to par 'twill be wuth ten. S'pose we got er thousand shares. In er few years we could jest sell out 'n be rich. I was er talkin' with Simon Dart this mornin' 'n he ses that 'ere stock is dead sartin to go for er premium inside o' ten years. Jest you think o' that, Tilly. We could leave this ole house, buy er nice little place at the Corner, 'n settle down 'n be somebody."

"Who is sellin'this stock?" demanded Tilly, coldly, and it was very evident that she did not share in her husband's enthusiasm.

"Simon Dart."

"What's he git for his work?"

"I don't know, I 'spose they gin him the inside track on some o' the stock."

"Well, you may jest depend 'pon it, Noah Griffin he hasn't a cent o' that stock in his name. He knows too much. He's a smooth talkin', oily rascallion, jest suited to make money out o' the fools round him. He's a sly one, he is. It's er very easy thing for him to fleece people like you with er little bogus paper with er high soundin' name hitched on to it. How d'ye know there's any sech company? Don't you think for one minit I'd trust that smirkin' hypocrit of er Sime Dart. Thank goodness, my senses haven't deserted me, howsomever it may be with you."

"Now look er here, Tilly, I know what I'm talkin' erbout. I aint so big a fool as you think I be. When men like Rufus Blake go in to anything, the rest on us may consider with tolerable sartinty that there's a dollar in it somewhere. He's never bin known to lose er cent."

"Well, there's got to be er first time. You may be sartin, too, that he doesn't risk his home in any sech speculation. He's got some surplus money to put into sech things. You might have had some, too, if you'd worked half as hard as he has. There was a time when you was wuth more than he was."

"But you know very well, Tilly," said Noah, dolefully, 'that I've never bin er rale well man; that makes er powerful sight 'o difference in this life."

"Yes, you're a very puny man, you are," said Tilly, with a sneering laugh. "You've never seen er rale sick day since we've bin married. The only thing you've bin sick on is work, 'n I think that disease was born in you."

"It's no use er harpin' on that ole strain, Tilly. You don't understand me, 'n I'm all through hopin' that you ever will; but all that's nothin' to do with the question. What do you think o' my scheme?"

"I think it's er humbug, that's what I think on't. I can jest tell you, Noah Griffin, that what folks has in this world they have to work for, unless they're able, like Sime Dart, to jew it out o' folks that has worked for it. Where d'ye 'spose the money's comin' from to make that stock wuth so much?"

"Out o' the profits."

"Out o' the fiddlesticks! You haven't got so much sense as I thought you had. You can jest make up your mind that what one man gains in them deals, some other feller loses. The fellers that gits the profits are the ones that work the swindle."

"Well, Tilly, we can be er long side o' the winners. I ve got—" here Noah cast a cautious glance about the room and lowered his voice to a confidential whisper—"er chance to git in on the inside."

"Nonsense, you ninny. You'd be sartin sure to lose all you had if there was any chance for it. Thank goodness, this 'ere place can't go out o' our hands without my consent. If it could, the both on us would ha' bin in the poor house years ago."

Noah was about to make some response to this emphatic declaration when both he and Tilly were startled and terrified by a most unexpected occurrence.

"No-a-a-a-h," came a weird, unearthly voice from the chimney.

"Di-did you hear that, Tilly?" he gasped.

"Don't you 'spose I've got ears?" responded the good woman, who had dropped her knitting work into her lap and was holding up both hands in amazement. "That was a sperit, Noah. I've heard 'em rap 'n' whisper er good many times, but I'll allow I've never heard 'em holler right out like that before."

"Hadn't we better go, Tilly?" asked Noah nervously.

"Go where?"

"Down to Grover's or Benson's. You know we haint run in on either on 'em for a long time."

"Now jest look er here, Noah Griffin. Listen to my advice 'n' don't be fool enough to think you can run away from a sperit. If that sperit's got anything to say to you, I'm tellin' you he's goin' to say it, 'n' I jest advise you to treat him civilly."

"Perhaps 'twas the wind," suggested Noah with evident agitation; but this idea was speedily shown to be a delusion.

"No-a-a-ah Gri-i-1ffin," moaned the same weird voice in the chimney.

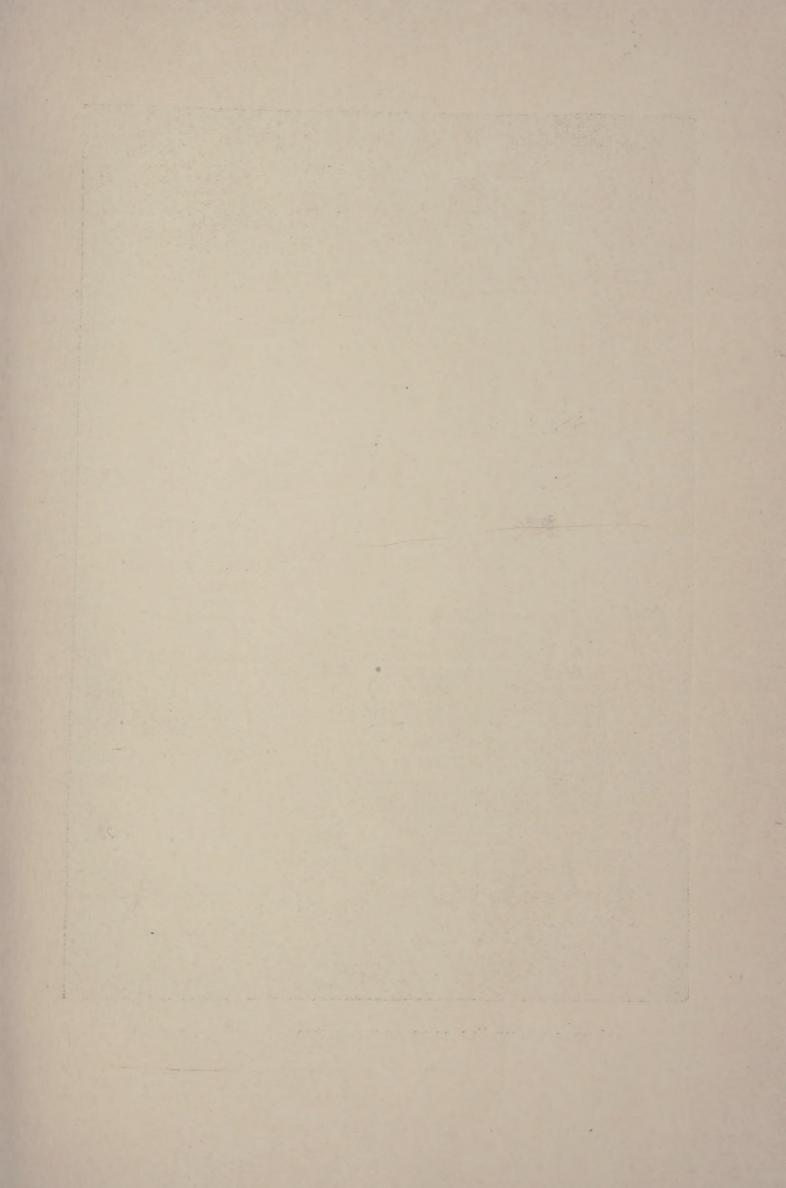
"Answer him, you numskull," said Tilly, as her spouse rose to his feet and with blanched face moved his chair away from the fire-place.

"Wh-wh-who is it?" demanded Noah faintly.

"I am the spirit of universal condemnation."

"There. I knew 'twas a sperit," said Tilly triumphantly.

"Now I guess you'll begin to b'lieve I know what I'm talkin' erbout. Ask him what he wants. Be sociable, you simpleton."





"I promise ye I'll turn over er new leaf" (Page 141)

"Wha-what d'ye want?" gasped Noah, and it was evident that he was completely terrified. His face was ghastly white and his teeth chattered.

"To pronounce the verdict of public opinion upon your worthless life," came the response in tones that brought the cold sweat to Noah's forehead, and made the chills run down his back-bone. "You have been a miserable, lazy, shiftless, worthless, complaining creature, Noah Griffin," continued the voice in accents of deep and doleful reproach.

"I-I know it," was Noah's humble admission.

"You have let your good wife do work that no woman should do; you have been envious of your more industrious neighbors; you have never kept your fences in repair, and your cattle have run the roads to be the pests of all the neighbors. What hast thou to say to these charges, O miserable man?"

"Noth-nothin'," was Noah's faint response.

"All of your neighbors are disgusted with you."

"I dare say."

"You deserve to be dragged down from this world forever-r."

"O Lord," groaned the now thoroughly conscience-stricken man. "Say somethin' to him, Tilly."

"This is none o' my business," said the good woman grimly.

"That 'ere sperit is after you. Them same things has bin whispered to me er good many times."

"No-a-a-ah, we have come for you," continued the weird voice from the chimney.

"Have mercy. Have mercy. I'll do different. I promise ye I'll turn over er new leaf."

"Will you build a good bunk fence of whole cedar logs clear round your farm?"

"Ye-e-e-s."

"And be an industrious citizen, contented with your lot in life."

"I'll-I'll try."

"Very well, Noah. We'll leave you this time; but woe, woe to you if we return again. We shall expect you to begin a new life at once; and start that new fence this very week."

"I will. I will."

"Very well, sir. We shall watch you, sir—watch you night and day. Farewell, sir, till we meet again."

The hollow, ghastly tones of the voice in the chimney became silent, but Noah sat pale and motionless in his chair, and it was evident that the ordeal he had been through had left him in a most frightened and exhausted condition. From that day, however, a marked change came over his life. people of Chestnut were astounded to see a new fence grow up about the Griffin place that fairly vied for first honors with the famous one of Andrew Benson. Noah's buildings were newly shingled and put in repair; his door-yard was cleaned up; his fall ploughing was done long before the frosts came; and he and Tilly began to make their appearance Sundays at the Corner meeting-house. The startling rumor grew current in the town that Tilly no longer did the milking. People were afforded the novel spectacle of Noah Griffin working early and late. They began to speak of him as a likely man, and to wonder what had wrought such a marvellous transformation in him. But those who were able to clear up the mystery held their peace, and Chestnut people were forced to record it among the modern miracles.

CHAPTER X.

THE BURNING OF GRANDFATHER BENSON'S BARN.

As may be imagined, the effect which the practical test of their speaking tube had upon Noah and Tilly Griffin was a source of no little sport to Raymond and Byer. If the alarmed and astounded couple could have seen them snicker, punch each other in the ribs, and struggle to choke back their laughter, as they stood over the little old chimney on the roof top, it is to be seriously doubted if the prank would have been attended with such good results.

"Did you ever see the beat of that?" said Byer in a convulsed whisper. "I had no idea they would bite so easily."

"They are just the fish to be caught with that kind of bait," returned Raymond. "If they hadn't been, I shouldn't have tried it on them. Of course it's simple enough to us who are operating the joke, but we must remember it's all real to them."

"I believe Tilly is the braver of the two," whispered Byer a moment later.

"Well, that's to be expected. You know she's always been the real man of the house, and besides that, she's lived among us spirits for a long time and feels more at home with us than Noah does."

Byer chuckled merrily at this conceit. "You beat all the

fellows I've ever known," he said with an approving slap on Raymond's shoulder. "What's that Noah just said?"

"He's promised to do the milking for Tilly if we'll let him

remain on this mundane sphere a while longer."

"The milking! Why, you must have driven the man crazy. He'd certainly never make such a promise as that in his sober senses."

"That must be it, I guess," said Raymond, struggling hard to choke back a laugh. "What do you suppose he has just promised to do?"

"I can't imagine."

"To build a fence of whole cedar rails clear round his farm."

"That settles it. The fellow is certainly insane. We've frightened him out of his wits. What's that he just said?"

"That he'd try and be content with his lot in life."

"Proof enough," said Byer decisively. "The man has certainly gone stark, staring mad—it may be, though, that you've hypnotized him by the soothing effect of that voice of yours."

"That may be it, perhaps. Be careful, Byer, and don't make so much noise on those shingles. If they should suspect anything, it would spoil the effect of the best lesson Noah ever had in his life. I've found him a very docile pupil; nothing contentious about him tonight, I can tell you."

At this moment the full moon broke from behind a bank of fleecy clouds and lit up the night with its mellow beams.

"It won't do for us to stay here any longer," whispered Byer. "You must ring down the curtain on Noah. Anyone driving along the main road could see us just as plain as day."

"I'm all through," responded Raymond.

- "How did you leave him?"
- "On probation."
- "Do you think he'll do what he promised to?"
- "I haven't the slightest doubt of it."
- "There's one thing I think was a little too rough on Noah."
- "What's that?"

"To make him promise to be contented with his lot. Why, Noah Griffin wouldn't be himself if he didn't have somebody or something to growl about. It's my opinion you've killed him, cruel, cruel spirit," he added with mock solemnity.

"Perhaps so; but I wasn't so severe on him as you imagine. I only made him promise to try to be contented. He didn't contract to do more. I was liberal with him, you see, for I knew that however willing Noah might be in the spirit—and you must bear clearly in mind that this night's proceedings have been wholly in the spirit,—he might fall from the lofty purposes then formed when he found himself once more in the flesh."

"Yes, you were very considerate," laughed Byer.

As the boys were descending the long hill that sloped down to the bank of the brook opposite the Benson homestead, they met a team coming slowly up the ascent. It was a long, loose-running, open buggy, of somewhat ancient design, drawn by a heavy farm horse. The driver was closely muffled up in a heavy buffalo coat. His broad-rimmed felt hat was drawn well over his eyes, and he leaped forward upon his seat as if deeply engrossed in his reflections. As the boys came opposite him he suddenly straightened up and gave them a sharp, piercing look. Raymond was surprised to recognize in the bright moonlight the face of old Pete Atkins. The look of malignant hatred which it wore showed that its

owner still cherished very bitter memories of the affair on Bent Hill, in which his favorite dog had come to an untimely end.

Raymond was not by any means a timid boy, as the reader, doubtless, has already discovered. He was resolute and energetic, and unusually cool for his years. Nevertheless, there was something in the look which the Chestnut rumseller gave him from under his shaggy eyebrows, that made him feel decidedly uncomfortable.

"That fellow will never be satisfied until he has appeared his anger at me by doing me some injury," he mused.

The savage hatred of old Pete's glance had not escaped the attention of Byer, either, although, as Raymond had kept his own counsel concerning the affair on Bent Hill, he did not assign any personal motive for it, or attach any significance to it so far as himself and his companion were concerned.

"That old fellow's hatching up some mischief, I'll be bound, he said, "or else he's meditating on some of the deviltry he's committed in the past. I suppose it would take a good many large volumes to tell all he's done in that line. Whew! but did you notice the scowl he had on? His eyes, too, glistened just like a snake's—but that's not surprising; he belongs to that family."

"He was evidently thinking pretty hard about something," answered Raymond, who was turning over some anxious thoughts in his own mind.

"I shouldn't say the old fellow found much pleasure in his reflections," continued Byer, with a shake of his head. "He looked like a man with the colic. Did you ever see such a fiendish expression on a human face?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Right here, on this hill," said Raymond, with a short and somewhat nervous laugh, rousing himself from the despondency which his meeting with Pete had produced, and making a forced effort to appear gay.

"Oh, I know that," responded Byer impatiently, "I meant anywhere else; besides, I hope you don't think I'd call that a human face. Pete Atkins always made me believe there was some truth in that idea of man descending from monkeys."

"And a great descent it was, too—for some of them," said Raymond.

"Let me see; what is it you call that? The some kind of a notion."

"The Darwinian theory?"

"Yes, that's what I was driving at. I think he's one of those links they've had so much trouble to find."

"You're prejudiced, Byer," said Raymond lightly.

"Perhaps I am. I'll allow I have my likes and dislikes, so far as people are concerned. I always form a sort of opinion of every stranger I meet. Some I kind of warm towards, while others make me feel as chilly as an ice cake. I can't explain why it is, and I know it's foolish; but it's so, all the same. I suppose we ought not to sit in judgment upon anyone's character until we have some reasonable grounds to do it on."

"I agree with you there, Byer," said Raymond. "First impressions are very apt to be incorrect. We shouldn't let the prejudices they stimulate get the upper hands of our cooler judgment. There are a good many excellent people in the world whose manner is against them, and who, if judged entirely by the impression they create with strangers, would never be appreciated for their true worth. You take a bash-

ful, retiring, timid person, lacking in self-confidence, and he is very apt to make a decidedly poor showing with those who are unacquainted with him. He will stammer and blush and get confused. His words will all seem to come backforemost, though perhaps among his friends he may be brilliant and fluent. I tell you, Byer, you can't tell from outside appearance how much there is in a man, any more than you can tell how far a cat can jump from the length of her tail."

"That's so. I remember when I visited my cousin at Bowdoin College last winter, that there was a large fellow at the club, whom I immediately picked out for one of the Daniel Websters of the institution. He was a handsome fellow, easy and graceful in his manners, and bright as a dollar in his conversation. I was considerably taken with him and immediately set him down for one of the heavy weights. When we got back to the room, I asked my cousin about him, and was perfectly dumbfounded when he told me that the fellow was the cheekiest, the shallowest and the cheapest in the whole crowd. He added that he was a perfect dunce in his studies. I was completely taken aback, and asked him who the smartest fellow at that table really was.

'Did you see the quiet little fellow at the foot of the table?'
'That little freckle-faced chap,' says I.

'The very one,' says he. 'Well, he's the ablest man in our society, and one of the brightest fellows in the whole college. There's meat in his cocoanut.'"

"Well, I guess it surprised you a little, didn't it?" asked Raymond with evident interest.

"You may just believe it did; but it taught me one wholesome lesson, and that was not to judge too much by outward appearances." "It's a good one to learn, Byer, but a hard one to put in practice. There are some people that we feel an instinctive aversion to, the first time we meet them. Without knowing why, we feel that we dislike them. There may, or may not, be reason for this feeling, but unless it is changed by subsequent acquaintance, it will stand as our permanent judgment in either case."

"That's very true," assented Byer. "Do you know, I took a terrible dislike to Ned Grover the first time I ever saw him, and now he's one of the best friends I have."

"That's strange."

"Isn't it? It makes me laugh now, to think of it. Father and I were changing works with Mr. Grover the fall after we bought our farm and moved here to Chestnut. Ned didn't have very much to say to me. He was a good deal more reserved then than he is now—in fact, you couldn't imagine a greater change in a fellow than has come over him since he began to go out round and get acquainted with people. Do you know, I thought he was stuck up and felt himself better than me."

"What an idea," laughed Raymond. "Why, there never was a fellow in the world that had any less snobbishness about him."

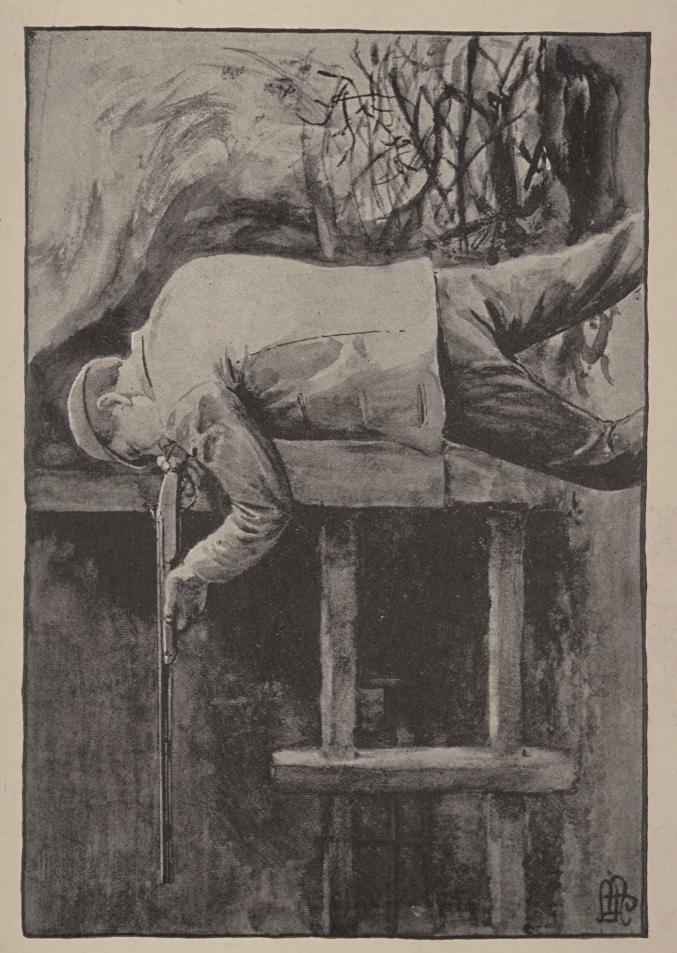
"I know it. I found that out when I grew better acquainted with him. That's what makes my first impression of him seem so amusing."

By this time the boys had reached the farmhouse. It stood dark and silent, its inmates wrapped in slumber. They were a little puzzled at first as to how they should reach their room without arousing grandfather and grandmother Benson, both of whom were light sleepers.

They stood for a few moments by the door in the ell, discussing the situation, when a bright thought suddenly occurred to Raymond. He remembered that the window in his room was open, for grandmother Benson firmly believed in giving sleeping apartments an abundance of pure air. The ladder which he and Byer had used in their burglar joke leaned against the side of the shed where grandfather Benson had used it in patching a leak in the roof. By its aid the two "sperits" who had exerted such a magic influence upon Noah Griffin, were soon snoring soundly between the warm blankets of the bed in Raymond's den.

A few days later Raymond was awakened in the small hours of the morning by a noise in the stable. He and Byer hastened out to see what the trouble was, and discovered one of the horses cast in his stall. After a good deal of work they succeeded in getting him on his feet again. As they were passing from the stable to the ell of the house, in returning to their room, Raymond caught a glimpse of someone dodging behind the barn. Hastily telling Byer what he had seen, and leaving him to watch, he rushed to the shed and seized a single-barreled shot gun which hung there, and which had been heavily loaded with double B shot for the benefit of a hawk that had made occasional raids upon the poultry. Thus armed he hastened towards the barn, Byer accompanying him with the lantern. As they reached the yard a sheet of flame shot up from the corner of the great building, and by its light two men were seen running in the direction of the cedar swamp. In a moment Raymond's gun was at his shoulder, and a sharp report rang out upon the night.

"I've hit one, sure's the world, Byer," he cried exultingly, as the smoke cleared away. "but we can't follow him now.



"A SHARP REPORT RANG OUT UPON THE NIGHT" (Page 150)



Go into the tie-up and let out the cattle. The hay mows are on fire and we can't save the building."

Byer hastened to do as directed, and soon the cattle came rushing into the yard, bellowing with fright. In a few moments the great building was one vast roaring mass of flame, and when Dud and Mr. and Mrs. Benson arrived on the scene it lit up the whole country for miles around with its bright glare.

Fortunately the barn stood a good distance from the other buildings and there was no wind, otherwise all would doubtless have gone. The great sparks and cinders flew about in the draught created by the intense heat and many of them fell upon the other buildings. It required the most unceasing vigilance to keep them from accomplishing still further destruction.

Very soon the neighbors began to flock in from every direction. In a short time a large number of people were on the ground. A bucket brigade was formed from the brook to the house which, together with the neighboring out-buildings, was thoroughly wet down. But no attempt was made to save the barn. Any such effort would have been useless, for it was a veritable tinder box, built as it was of old growth pine and filled full with hay and straw.

While grandfather Benson and the neighbors were looking after the house and the surrounding buildings, Raymond and Byer hastened in the direction of the swamp to look for the fire-bug who had been shot. After a careful search they discovered him in a clump of alder bushes, on the edge of the timber, where he had evidently crawled for concealment, though the blood-stained track he left behind him would have speedily revealed his hiding place. He was a darkskinned man about forty years of age. His clothing had been patched so many times that it was difficult to tell what had been the original texture. There was an ugly looking wound in his hip, from which the blood flowed profusely. He was evidently suffering intense pain, but he gritted his teeth in a savage attempt to stifle the groans that were on his lips. It was evident that he did not purpose to show any weakness in the presence of his pursuers.

"You been keeled me, curse you," he groaned fiercely, as the boys bent over him.

"Nonsense," responded Raymond. "You are very far from being a corpse yet. A dead man wouldn't have any such amount of voice and venom."

"It would be your own fault if you should die," added Byer. "We didn't cause you to burn that barn. That's a pretty hard crime and will give you lots to think about in the future. The punishment for arson is the same as for murder in this state—imprisonment at hard labor for life."

The wounded man remained sullenly silent, evidently feeling that this was the wisest course to pursue.

"He's suffering too much to care about that now, Byer," said Raymond. "Where did old Pete go?" he added abruptly to the incendiary.

"Down in—no, what I been saying? There wasn't been no Pete with me."

"You know better than that," answered Raymond. "You started out to tell the truth, and you had better do it. There is nothing to be gained by concealment. Old Pete Atkins was with you. He was the one who hired you to assist in this job."

The wounded man made no reply, but gritted his teeth and

closed his lips firmly together. He was evidently afraid to open his mouth, lest something should escape that ought not to. Byer remained with him while Raymond went for some of the neighbors and an old mattress, upon which the man was borne to Mr. Benson's house. His arrival created no little excitement among the people there. They crowded about him as he lay in the center of the big kitchen floor, but none of them recognized him. He was a stranger to all. The looks that were given him were far from friendly. Some of the hot bloods made open talk of lynching him, while many of the cooler heads thought he should be immediately taken to Bolton and lodged in jail. Among those who inclined to this latter opinion were Mr. Grover and Dean Percy.

"It's no use to take any chances with such fellows, Andrew," insisted the latter. "I tell you they are worse than poison, and are always turning up when we escape the rust and rot, to destroy our property and make it harder than ever to pay our taxes."

"I shouldn't keep him here an hour," said Mr. Grover, emphatically, and it was evident that his view of the matter was the one very generally entertained by the crowd.

"I can't do that, neighbors," said grandfather Benson, slowly. "The man is dangerously shot and at my door. It makes no difference what he has done to me or mine. It is my duty to take Christian care of him, and not act the part of a heathen. When he is fully able to stand the journey, we will take him to Bolton—not before. Dud, I wish you would take the bay mare and go after Dr. Lemons. Fix up the bed in the spare room, mother, and we'll see that this man is well cared for. Perhaps you had better get some bandages ready for the doctor when he comes."

The neighbors offered no further objections, though the opinion was freely expressed among them on the way home that not one man in a thousand would have acted that way towards a man who had burned his barn, and that if there was ever a truly Christian man in town it was Uncle Andrew Benson.

Dr. Lemons pronounced the injury of the incendiary to be by no means a fatal one. He found his patient weak from loss of blood, but, after he had carefully dressed the wound, he expressed the opinion that the man could safely be moved to Bolton inside of a week.

"The hay is the worst loss," said grandfather Benson to Raymond that evening as they stood by the charred ruins which the fire had left. "The barn itelf was fairly well insured, and you and Byer were able to save the stock. All my grain was threshed and in the bins of the stable. After all, we have reason to be thankful that we escaped so easily."

"I wish it had been old Pete I shot instead of his confedrate."

"Peter who?"—grandfather Benson never used nicknames.

"Atkins."

"What of him?"

"Why, he is the one who set that barn afire."

"That is a very serious charge to bring against a fellow townsman."

"But I know it was he," and thereupon Raymond related the circumstances under which he had shot Pete's dog; the angry threats the old man had indulged in, and the half admission which the wounded man had made in the swamp to him and Byer.

Grandfather Benson listened to his story with evident sur-

155

prise. "I wish I had known of these things before," he said thoughtfully.

"I know I ought to have told you," said Raymond regretfully, "but I was afraid that you and grandmother would worry about it."

"Perhaps we might, my boy, but it would have lifted a load from your shoulders. You mustn't try to bear such burdens all alone."

"I'm to blame for all this, grandfather," said Raymond impulsively.

"Not at all. I don't see that you are to blame for any of it. If the fellow in the house gets well and is punished, together with his confederate, I shall think that what has been our small loss has been the town's great gain. I should not like to think that you had taken the life of a fellow man, even though you detected him in the commission of a capital crime."

"It won't be my fault, grandfather, if this night's work isn't the beginning of the end of Pete Atkins's career in this town," said Raymond earnestly, as he went to his room to catch a little troubled sleep after the excitements of the night.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FAMOUS ARSON TRIAL.

"Halloo, Raymond, what in the world are you doing here?"

It was Ned Grover who asked this question and as he spoke he threw down a number of steel traps which he carried on his shoulder and seated himself upon the stump of a large fir which his friend had just cut down near his camp in the swamp.

"I'm making sap troughs."

"Sap troughs. Where in the world do you expect to use them?"

"Right here on this farm."

"I don't see where you'll find maples enough."

"I'll not, in one place, but by taking them all about the farm I think I can find fully four hundred that will do to tap. I expect to do quite a business from them next spring."

"It will be lots of work collecting the sap, won't it?"

"Yes, but I sha'n't mind that. You see, it will come at that season of the year when we've little else to do. I shall have plenty of time at my disposal and can attend to it without any trouble."

"Where will you boil the sap down?"

"In the shed. I'm going to have those two large farmer's

boilers for evaporators. Besides those, I shall have a small kettle on the kitchen stove to syrup off in. I'm inclined to think I shall not make much of any sugar. It will take too much time."

"That's a good idea. What will you do with your syrup?" "Sell it."

"Well, I guess you won't have any trouble in doing that. It's strange that more farmers don't go into the business in this county."

"It has been a surprise to me, too. In Vermont or New Hampshire a good farm would hardly be considered complete without its sap orchard with its sap house right in the midst of the trees. They use large shallow pans there for evaporators, and have many ingenious contrivances for collecting the sap. I visited several orchards at Sandwich, New Hampshire, a few years ago, and was very much interested in the work. A good sap orchard properly conducted will supply the family with sugar for the whole year. The maple sugar can usually be exchanged pound for pound, or better, for granulated at the stores. So you see this is quite an important industry on a farm. The cost of sugar is more to a family you know than the cost of flour."

"It seems to me that you are starting your operations pretty early. It's a long time yet before spring."

"I know it, but it's going to be considerable of a task to cut all my troughs and get my spiles ready. Besides, I may not be able to work at it for weeks at a time. Where are you going with those traps?"

"Down where the old horse was carried. The lynxes and foxes have been holding high carnival there."

"I can tell you a better way than that to get at them."

"How?"

"Get some strychnine and sprinkle it over the carcass."

"That wouldn't do at all. The law provides that any person who leaves poison within two hundred rods of any improved land shall be fined not less than twenty or more than fifty dollars, or be imprisoned between thirty and sixty days. Father showed me the law in the revised statutes this very morning."

"I don't see the sense of such a law."

"You don't? Well, I do. Poison is a plaguey risky thing to handle. Somebody poisoned a fox with strychnine on the edge of Dean Percy's pasture a few years ago. The next season a valuable cow that ate the grass, that grew over the spot where the bait was dropped, was killed by the poison.

"Who told you that?" demanded Raymond.

"Dean himself."

"WeIll, don't take a mite of stock in it. His cow probably got sick and died. Not knowing what the real trouble was, he laid it to that. It doesn't stand to reason that there would be enough poison left in the place where it was deposited, after it had been diluted a thousand times by the snows of winter and the rains of spring, to kill an animal as large as a cow, even if she had made a cud of the whole sod, instead of the grass that grew out of it. The frost alone would have been enough to have taken the strength out of the poison in that length of time. Why, if your theory were correct, nobody would ever dare to use a field again after it had been plastered with a powerful poison like Paris green."

"I think you're wrong, Raymond. Strychnine will hold its strength wonderfully. I've heard of lots of similar cases. Why should they pass a law to keep it two hundred rods from the clearings if it is all harmless by the time the stock is turned out in the spring?"

"To prevent its use in summer, probably. I don't believe, though, that it was specially designed to protect stock. It was probably enacted for the benefit of dogs."

"I don't think so. I know I shouldn't want anyone poisoning wild animals near the clearings on our farm."

"Do you remember the first bear we ever saw?" asked Raymond, abruptly changing the subject.

"Well, I guess I do," laughed Ned. "It was on the birch ridge on your grandfather's back lot. We were out partridge hunting, and had told each other what sport we'd have if we could only run across a bear; how we would kill and stuff it, and make a nice little sum by selling it to a museum or dime show."

"Yes," said Raymond, "and just what we'd do with the money we'd get for it."

"We had everything all planned out," continued Ned, "and were deep in a discussion of some of the minor details, when what should we see over the brow of the ridge but a real, genuine bear. Weren't we frightened boys, though. It seemed to me that I could feel every hair on my head stand straight on end, and my heart fairly pound against my ribs. I wheeled about and ran for home at the top of my speed without taking the gun from my shoulder. You were not far behind me, either."

"No," said Raymond, "I guess I wasn't. When I got down near the cross road I threw the first look I had dared to over my shoulder, and found to my intense relief, that the bear wasn't following us. Then I grew bold again, and coming up to where you were waiting on the bars for me, I demanded in

tones of lofty indignation why you ran away with the gun just as I was ready to shoot that bear. You didn't take the bluff, though, but answered coolly, 'It's no use to play bold now. You were just as scared as I was.' I made no reply to that assertion. I couldn't deny it."

"I guess we were the two most frightened boys in Maine about that time," laughed Ned. "Well, each of us has had the fun of shooting a bear since that, though, as Allen Webster says, that doesn't make us sportsmen. Both of them were in traps."

"Well, I believe I had rather have them there, sportsman or no sportsman," answered Raymond. "I'm not ambitious to indulge in the Joel Webber style of bear hunting."

Both boys laughed heartily at this allusion.

"Oh, I saw Sam Brown this forenoon," exclaimed Ned suddenly, as if the fact had just occurred to him. "He was on his way home from Bolton. He saw your fire-bug there and says he is the very same man that was with Pete Atkins, when he and his cousin saw them at Amos Dole's old camp on Bower Brook."

"I had suspected that," said Raymond. "I have no doubt that he is the fellow who has helped Pete in his smuggling operations, and that they were returning from one of their trips over the line when Sam saw them."

"I never had a doubt of it."

"I'm glad to learn of Sam's visit to the jail. It furnishes me with an important piece of testimony."

"Well, I hope you may get enough to drive old Pete out of town. It would be the best thing that possibly could happen for Chestnut," said Ned, as he gathered up his traps and continued on through the swamp. Grandfather Benson said very little at supper time when Raymond told him of Sam Brown's discovery, but the next day a warrant was sworn out against Pete Atkins on charge of arson, and before night he was occupying quarters near his partner in the Bolton jail.

It was a week later when the trial of the two men came off. Two of the ablest lawyers in Bolton had been engaged to defend the prisoners, and the case attracted wide attention.

Against the first man, who gave his name as Jean Gambier, and his native place at Montreal, the evidence was conclusive. His counsel made no attempt at defense, but confined themselves to an effort to secure a light sentence, upon the ground that their client was not the principal in the crime, but that he was in fact merely the tool of some stronger man who had planned the affair and himself applied the torch. It is possible that they might have met with some degree of success if their client had revealed the name of his accomplice. But this he stubbornly refused to do. As a result he was not successful in securing any sympathy, The direct testimony of Raymond and Byer Ames told heavily against him, and he was given the full penalty of the law.

The people of Chestnut were very much interested in the trial of Pete Atkins, and a number of them were in attendance at the court house when his case came up.

Byer testified to seeing two men run from the fire. One of them he identified as Gambier. The other he believed to be Atkins, but did not get a fair look at his face, and would not be willing to swear positively as to his identity. He related the facts connected with the discovery of Gambier, and the slip he had made in his partial answer to Raymond's question regarding the direction in which Pete Atkins had

gone. After a brief cross examination he was excused and Raymond took the stand. His direct testimony was simply a corroboration of Byer's, with the exception that he positively identified Atkins as the second incendiary. At its close the leading attorney for Atkins, a sharp, incisive man, began a cross examination.

"How long have you known Mr. Atkins?"

"About six years."

"When did you see him last, prior to the fire?"

"About two weeks before."

"Where?"

"In the road on Bent Hill."

"How far is that from your home?"

"About a mile."

"Where had you been?"

"On a partridge hunt."

"Were you alone at the time?"

"Yes."

"On that occasion did you shoot a dog belonging to Mr. Atkins?"

"I did."

"And this caused some pretty sharp words between you, did it not?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Atkins was naturally angry at the killing of his valuable dog and threatened to whip you, did he not?"

"He did."

"Did he approach you with that evident purpose?"

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"I told him not to try it."

- "Did you point your gun at him?"
- "No, sir."
- "You are quite sure of that?"
- "Yes, sir."
- "Did you tell him you would shoot him if he struck you?"
- "Yes."
- "You were pretty angry, were you not?"
- "Yes, sir."
- "What did Mr. Atkins do when you told him you'd shoot if he struck you?"
 - "He got into his wagon and drove off."
- "You have had a grudge against him ever since then, have you not?"
 - "No, sir. I had no reason to. He didn't touch me."
- "You entertain bitter feelings concerning the affair, do you not?"
 - "The memory of it is not a pleasant one."
 - "Precisely. In other words, you are an enemy to Atkins?"
 - "Not exactly. I am not one of his friends, rather."
- "How long was it after you shot at Gambier before you conversed with him?"
 - "About twenty minutes, I should say."
 - "His wound was a severe one was it not?"
 - "It was."
 - "He was bleeding badly when you came to him?"
 - "Yes."
 - "And very weak from the loss of blood?"
 - "Quite so."
 - "He must have been suffering severe pain, mustn't he?"
 - "I should say that he was."
 - "He was not in very good physical condition, then?"

"Certainly not."

"Not in a condition to be really responsible for what he said, was he?"

"I should think he was."

"You should think that he was—now, as a matter of fact, don't you know he was not?"

"No, sir."

"Wasn't his language somewhat incoherent?"

"Not at all. I think he understood perfectly well what he was saying."

"Still you will admit that it would not be surprising if he were not able to think very clearly, under the circumstances?"

"Perhaps not."

"That will do, sir," said the lawyer, with the air of a man who had won most important concessions from the witness.

"One moment," said the county attorney, as Raymond was about to step from the stand. "Had you ever had any trouble with Atkins prior to the night you shot his dog?"

"No, sir. None whatever."

"Did you do anything to provoke his dog?"

"No, sir. The dog ran up and seized me by the leg. That was the first I saw of it, and I had said nothing whatever to it."

"You naturally object to being bitten by any man's dog, do you not?"

"I do, certainly."

"Did you know when this dog seized you that it belonged to Atkins?"

"I did not."

"So your treatment of it had no connection with the owner-ship?"

"None whatever."

"You would have done the same, whoever had owned it?"

"I should, certainly."

"Did Atkins make any threats?"

"Yes, sir."

"What were they?"

"He said I would wish I had steered clear of him. When I told him I didn't fear him, he said the time might come when I would sing a different tune."

"He gave you to understand very forcibly, did he not, that he meant to take revenge on you for killing his dog?"

"Yes, sir."

"That will do, sir," said the county attorney to Raymond with a triumphant nod that was intended to impress the testimony upon the minds of the jury.

At the request of the counsel for the defense, Byer Ames was recalled.

"You stated, did you not," asked the sharp-faced attorney, "that you were unable to see the face of Gambier's companion on the night of the fire?"

"Yes, sir."

"You thought it was Atkins, but would not be willing to swear to it?"

"No, I would not be positive about it."

"What led you to think that the man was Atkins?"

"His general appearance."

"But you just stated to the court that you could not swear to his identity."

"That is true. I cannot."

"Now just reflect a moment. Was not the idea that the man was Mr. Atkins first suggested to you by young Benson?"

"I do not remember."

"Did he not cry out 'That's Pete Atkins,' or words to that effect?"

"I do not recollect. I was too much excited at the time to recall now just what was said."

"He said something to you, did he not?"

"I am not certain, but think he did."

"You do not remember what it was?"

"I do not."

"Wasn't the occurrence of such a startling nature as would naturally fix its events in your mind?"

"Yes, sir, its events, but not the conversation connected with them."

"You would not be willing to say that young Benson didn't suggest to you that it was Atkins, would you?"

"No, sir."

The lawyer turned toward the jury with an insinuating smile that was intended to convey the opinion that the witness was unwilling to tell all he knew. He then opened upon Byer from another quarter.

"When you found Gambier, he was very faint and weak, was he not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Unable to talk much?"

"I should say rather unwilling."

"The few remarks that he made were disjointed and incoherent, were they not?"

"I did not notice that they were."

"You remember very distinctly, do you, his response to young Benson's question relative to Atkins?"

"I do. Yes, sir."

"Well now, sir," said the lawyer, assuming a very stern look and tone, "will you explain to the jury how it is that your memory, which was so singularly defective regarding the remarks of young Benson, is so wonderfully retentive regarding those of Gambier, notwithstanding the fact, as shown by young Benson's testimony, that both of these conversations occurred within the same half hour?"

"I don't know. I did not notice what Raymond said to me. I was too much excited at the sight of the fire, and too intent on saving the stock. When I saw Gambier, I had left the fire behind, and there was nothing to distract my attention from him or his remarks."

"An ingenius explanation, but scarcely a satisfactory one," sneered the attorney. "That will do, sir," he added.

"One moment, if you please," said the county attorney, as Byer was about to leave the stand.

"When did you first know of Raymond Benson's trouble with Atkins?"

"When he told it here in court."

"He has never said anything to you personally regarding it, has he?"

"Not a word."

"That is all," said the attorney, and Byer stepped from the stand with a sigh of relief.

Sam Brown was next called. He positively identified Gambier as the man whom he had seen with Pete Atkins a year before at Amos Dole's camp on Bower Brook. His story of the circumstances under which the meeting occurred created a decided sensation in the court room, and for the first time during the trial Pete Atkins looked troubled and hitched about uneasily in his chair. One of the deputy collectors at

the Custom House had stepped into the room for a moment, and it was evident that he was much interested in this testimony. Atkins had long been suspected of robbing Uncle Sam of a large amount of custom duties, but the government officials, though they had tried a number of times, had never been able to fasten the crime upon him.

A vigorous cross examination failed to shake in the least Sam's direct testimony, and when he left the stand the case looked considerably darker for the defence.

A number of other witnesses were called, from whom the attorney for the defence elicited the fact, despite the vigorous objections of the prosecuting officer to the admission of such testimony, that Raymond Benson had left the Free High School at Chestnut Corner owing to serious difficulty with the teacher—a difficulty in which he had exhibited a most vicious and insolent spirit.

Cross examination by the county attorney, however, drew forth testimony to the effect that Raymond had enjoyed a good reputation among his fellow townsmen; that he was known to be truthful, temperate and industrious; that most of his pranks at the High School had been in the character of good natured fun; that he was suffering with a headache when his trouble with Mr. Beecham occurred; that he had subsequently made ample apology to the teacher, who had fully accepted it, frankly acknowledging that he had himself been partially to blame in the affair; and that the two had parted the best of friends. The wife and sons of Atkins were then called to the witness stand and swore positively that he was not away from home on the night of the fire. This testimony was strongly corroborated by the hired man. An attempt was made to persuade Gambier to turn State's evidence, but this he stoutly refused to do.

The prosecuting officer then introduced a large amount of evidence from Chestnut people to show the previous bad character of Atkins; and from Dr. Lemons to prove that at no time during his attendance upon Gambier was his patient out of his head or incapable of rational thought. This closed the taking of testimony.

The counsel for the defense then addressed the jury.

He reminded them that the case before them was one of grave importance. The prisoner at the bar was on trial for a capital crime, one that was accorded the severest penalty known to the law of the state. There was no fault to be found with this provision. The crime of arson was a most heinous one and deserved the most stringent punishment. It was necessary for the safety of property and life that the laws should so provide. But because of the very grave nature of this crime, and the severity of the penalty attaching to it, there was all the more reason why an intelligent and impartial jury should exercise the greatest consideration before fixing so great a stigma upon a fellow man, and depriving him of the God-given rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. None but the most direct and positive evidence should be allowed the slightest weight in such a case. It was a serious responsibility to deal with the future of a human life-to say whether it should have the full and rational existence that God designed for it, or should be consigned to a living death—a future with no hope of release until the final summons. Certainly such a grave trust as this was not to be lightly exercised. Upon what did the case against his client rest? What direct and positive testimony had been adduced to show that he had burned Andrew Benson's barn? Not a particle. The principal witness in the prosecution of

Mr. Atkins was a boy who had been shown to have a personal grudge against him, growing out of a quarrel between the two over the killing of the prisoner's dog. It might have been that Mr. Atkins had made use of strong language upon that occasion. There was nothing surprising in that. Few men would tamely submit to the wanton killing of a favorite and valuable dog by an irresponsible boy. There was nothing but the boy's word to show that the dog had bitten him, and what reliance was to be placed on that? Who was this boy, anyway? One who had been shown, by the testimony of reliable witnesses, to be possessed of a vicious character, so vicious indeed that he had come very near assaulting his teacher a few weeks before with a heavy ruler. As a result of this he had left school for the evident purpose of avoiding expulsion. What did the testimony of such a boy amount to, especially when he was shown by his own admissions to have a personal hostility to the man against whom that testimony was directed? Was such evidence as this forever to deprive a man of his liberty and civil rights? He believed that the members of the jury would emphatically say no. Entertaining this grudge against Atkins young Benson was quick to detect, in the burning of his grandfather's barn, an opportunity for revenge. With this in mind he had artfully suggested to Ames the name of the prisoner at the bar as the second incendiary, a suggestion that in the darkness and excitement found a ready credence. Still further was the craft of young Benson exhibited in the abrupt question he had put to Gambier in the presence of Ames. That question was a leading one. It was put because young Benson saw that Gambier was in a condition to make any admission he desired him to. The man was weakened by the loss of blood. He was suffering intense agony. He was not in the slightest degree cognizant of or responsible for his fevered and incoherent utterances. Such testimony was worthless. It should not be given a moment's consideration in a case of such gravity. Of what importance had been the testimony of young Brown? It had simply tended to show that Gambier and Atkins had once been seen together more than a year before. There was nothing very damaging in this, even if it were true. there was the strongest reason to believe that this had been a case of mistaken identity. Both Gambier and Atkins positively denied that they had ever seen each other before they met at the jail. A year was a long time, and it was an easy thing for a boy like Brown to be mistaken in a case of identity where the meeting occurred so far back. Citizens of Chestnut had been brought in by the prosecution to testify to Atkins's bad character, but in nearly every instance cross examination had revealed the fact that they cherished personal feeling against the prisoner. Clearly such evidence was not of a reliable character, and should not be permitted to convict any man of so terrible a crime. The wife and sons of Atkins had fully established an alibi for him by showing that he was not absent from home at all on the night of the fire. This evidence was substantiated by the direct testimony of Donald Green, the hired man, who returned at half past two from a dance at Chestnut Corner and spoke with Atkins as he passed his bedroom door.

The defence then closed with a strong appeal to the jury to exclude every particle of testimony that was tainted with personal malice, and deal with the prisoner in an impartial spirit of fairness and justice.

CHAPTER XII.

AN UNEXPECTED VERDICT.

It was very evident that the plea of the defense had made a deep impression upon the minds of the jury, and all eyes were turned expectantly upon the county attorney when he arose to make the closing argument. He spoke, in opening, of the terrible crime of arson; one that frequently destroyed not only valuable property, but human life. With the fire-bug abroad in the land who could feel safe when he retired for the night? Criminals of this class give no thought to their victims. Strong men might be able to escape the terrors of the flames, but what a fate awaited the helpless women and children, suffocated with smoke, and unable to get out of the burning homes which incendiarism had converted into funeral pyres. It was well for society's sake that the law dealt severely with such criminals; otherwise who would be safe? It was the solemn duty of those charged with the administration of justice to see that such men did not escape, when once they came within the strong clutches of the law, but that the full measure of punishment was meted out to them. It would be impossible to conceive of a much stronger case than that against Atkins. The positive testimony of young Brown had established the fact that Gambier and Atkins had been seen together more than a year before the

burning of Mr. Benson's barn. They were evidently confederates, and the mysterious sacks which they had carried at the time when young Brown saw them might very likely have furnished interesting facts for the Custom House officials, could they have known the contents of them.

There was no blame attached to Raymond Benson for shooting Atkins's dog. The act was purely one of self defense and was done without any knowledge whatever of the ownership of the dog. It appeared from the evidence that Atkins had worked himself into a terrible rage over this affair, and had fiercely threatened young Benson with vengeance. That vengeance had come soon after in the burning of Andrew Benson's barn. It was a strange, unreasoning retaliation; but the testimony of a number of the best known and most respected citizens of Chestnut had shown that Atkins was of just the calibre to resort to such a method of satiating his malice. In this crime whom would he more naturally have selected as an assistant than the man Gambier, who had been his confederate in other mysterious, if not shady transactions? The guilt of this man had been established and he had been given the full penalty of the law. Why, then, should the principal in that crime be permitted to escape the punishment he so richly merited? Such a result would be plainly contrary to the spirit of justice. Atkins had been positively identified by Raymond Benson, who had seen him in the light of the burning barn running toward the swamp. This testimony was corroborated by Ames, who saw the man and believed him to be Atkins.

An attempt had been made to discredit the direct and damaging testimony of Raymond Benson, but it had proved unavailing. He had been shown by the testimony of leading

citizens of Chestnut to be a young man of undoubted integrity. Not only was Atkins plainly seen by Raymond Benson, but Gambier had practically admitted that he was his companion. This was established by the direct testimony of both Ames and young Benson. That was an important piece of testimony, coming, as it did, from one of the incendiaries. It was in itself almost sufficient to convict Atkins of arson, even were it unsupported by any other evidence. There was not the slightest reason to believe that Gambier was not in complete possession of all his faculties. This was shown not only by the testimony of Ames and Raymond Benson, but by the still stronger professional and entirely impartial evidence of Dr. Lemons.

The attempt of the defense to establish an alibi had been painfully weak. The testimony had been furnished by members of the prisoner's family, all but one of whom were impelled by the strongest motives that could come from kinship to save him, if possible, from the just consequences of his crime. The testimony of such interested parties should not be permitted to have weight. It deserved none. Much less should it be allowed to weigh against the evidence that positively connected the prisoner with this terrible crime. The county attorney closed with a strong plea to the jury to do their full duty and thus add to the protection of society by visiting upon Atkins the severe penalty of his crime, thereby deterring others from following in his footsteps.

There was a profound silence in the court room at the close of this plea. In a few words the judge charged the jury, reviewing briefly the points of law involved in the case, and urging them to return an impartial verdict. It was more than an hour after they left the court room before they returned, and there was a painful stillness when the clerk inquired, "Gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

"We have," responded the foreman.

"Is the prisoner guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty."

An angry murmur of surprise and disappointment ran around the room. It was apparent that the verdict was wholly unexpected. The evidence had been so strong against Atkins that his conviction was confidently and generally looked for.

"It's no use trying to get justice in that court," said Raymond bitterly to his grandfather Benson, as they drove home after the trial.

"Of course we are disappointed, my boy," was the response, but very likely we are not able to take the impartial view of the case that disinterested people are. Matters certainly looked differently to the jury than they do to us."

"Yes, that's apparent. There was evidence enough there, though, to have convinced an average jury of Hottentots that Pete Atkins burned our barn. I never saw twelve such lunkheads as were on that jury collected together in one group before. I tell you, it's a sad thing for justice when the administration of it is left in such hands. There is something wrong about the jury system, anyway. Scarcely a day passes that we do not hear of some knave escaping his just deserts through the failure of jurymen to do their duty."

"There is no doubt that justice frequently miscarries," answered Mr. Benson slowly. "Men are by no means infallible in framing or administering laws. Still we owe a great deal to that wise provision which secures to every man charged with crime a fair, free trial before a jury of his peers. If you feel inclined to question this, compare our methods of

Japan where the judge is supreme, and his one mind determines the life or death of the culprits that are tried before him. It is impossible that such a system can be in any true sense a judicial one. It is not surprising to read, in such cases, that courts of justice are also halls of torture."

"Perhaps you are right," said Raymond. "But I should feel humiliated to think that the men on that jury are my peers. Now that old Pete is out of limbo we shall have to be on the lookout for more mischief from him."

"I do not think he will trouble us further," said Mr. Benson.

"You don't suppose a man of his revengeful nature will forget or forgive the raking over we gave him in court, do you?"

"Probably not, but although Peter is a knave, he is by no means a fool. Public attention has been pretty much centered upon him by this trial, and he knows very well that if he should come before the court again he would be almost certain to go to Thomaston for a long term of years in the State Prison there. No, I will venture to say that, aside from his smuggling operations, he will keep pretty quiet for a while."

"I guess you are right," answered Raymond. "I hadn't thought of that."

"How did it go?" asked Dean Percy, coming down the road to meet them as they passed his house.

"Gambier was sentenced to State Prison for life," responded Mr. Benson.

"And old Pete?"

"He was acquitted."

"Acquitted! Well I swan. I thought there would be evidence enough against him to jug him for life. I tell you

it is a hard world for a man who is poor and honest," growled the misanthrope dolefully. "The villain that burns barns and smuggles liquor across the line goes free from the courts of justice to prosper and get rich through his knavery, while those of us who endeavor to live soberly and honestly have to scratch early and late to keep body and soul together, and get money enough to pay our taxes."

"Ah, well, Dean," said Mr. Benson soothingly, "you know the Holy Word tells us that a good name is rather to be chosen than great riches. About all any of us can hope to get out of this life is what we eat and drink and wear. A contented man is never poor.

"I've heard that sort of talk before, Andrew," said Dean with a mournful shake of his head. "It's true, I'll allow, that about all any of us can get out of this world is a living, but I tell you there is a pesky sight of difference in what men consider a living."

"That may be, Dean, but if a man is satisfied with his own lot, he will have no reason to feel envious of his neighbors."

"Perhaps not," responded Mr. Percy doubtfully. "We can't square our lives by maxims, though. I declare I felt so sure that the town was going to get rid of old Pete Atkins that I'm overcome with disappointment. Howsomever," he added as Mr. Benson and Raymond drove away, "there's a jumping off place to most everything, and the day will come when that old scamp will find himself at the end of his rope. The people of this town are beginning to wake up. When we all pull together it will mean the end of the rum business here in Chestnut."

"He's the most peculiar man I ever saw," said Raymond when they were out of hearing. "Here he is, one of the

most well-to-do men in town, and yet he is always grumbling about his taxes and fearing he will come to want."

"He comes naturally enough by his despondent turn of mind," said Mr. Benson. "It has run in the family for several generations. It is hereditary melancholia. There haven't been any of the Percys that I have ever known who were wholly free from it. I think Dean is the most cheerful one in the lot."

"I pity the others, then," said Raymond.

"His great grandfather, Jason Percy, cleared that place," continued grandfather Benson, musingly. "He was a terribly down spirited man. Everything in life looked gloomy to him. He grew worse as he grew older, and one day they found him dead in the shed chamber where he had cut his throat with an old razor. It caused great excitement in Chestnut, I can tell you. His widow lived to be nearly a hundred years old, and was one of the most lively and talkative old ladies in the town. She used to knit a great deal, and one of my earliest recollections is of going there with yarn that my mother spun to get her to knit me some winter socks and mittens. She was very fond of using big words, frequently with an amusing disregard for their meaning. She and her husband came to Chestnut from the province of New Brunswick. The town was young then, and, like others of the early settlers, they underwent a great many hardships. These Marm Percy loved dearly to relate. 'Ah,' she would say, peering at me over the gold bows of her glasses, 'When we first came to this county we went through all the animosities and pomposities that a poor man and woman could go through. We lost all our cattle except one old horse—and he died.' It's a peculiar fact," continued Mr. Benson, reflectively, "that every one of those Percy men whom I have known has had a bustling, cheerful little woman for a wife. If it hadn't been for that I think more of them might have followed Jason's example."

"It's the attraction of extremes," said Raymond.

"I suppose so. It shows, however, how wisely everything is ordered in nature, that such an attraction should exist between people of entirely different temperaments."

"Yes, that is true," assented Raymond.

"They used to tell some amusing stories concerning Jason's widow," continued grandfather Benson, with a merry chuckle at the recollection. "At the time her husband died the Groves Farm was owned by Major Reno, a jolly, whole souled man, long since passed to the other side, who loved a joke better than he did his dinner. He could never resist practicing his drolleries upon mother Percy, but for all that the old lady thought a good deal of him, and was a frequent visitor at his house. One time when there had been a long drought she came to him exclaiming:

'Did you ever see anything like this?'

'My soul, said the Major blandly. This is nothing, nothing at all, Mrs. Percy. When I was a boy we had such a terrible drought that we had to drive our cattle nine miles, and ferry them across three rivers to get them to water.'

'Sakes alive! Do tell!' said the old lady in genuine surprise, and she hurried off home to tell Jason, whom she found bemoaning the want of rain, and, as usual, predicting dire calamity.

'Why, this isn't anything, father,' she said. 'When Major Reno was a boy, they had such a terrible drought that they had to drive the cattle nine miles and ferry them across three rivers to get them to water.'

'Mercy sakes!' responded the old gentlemen. 'Why didn't they water them at the first one?'

'I declare to goodness, I never thought of that,' said the old lady in great chagrin, and it was a long time before she again put any stock in what Major Reno said. She regained confidence in him in time, however. One day he called at her house for a moment, and got to discussing the matter of miracles with her. From that the conversation drifted on to faith, which the Major sagely asserted was the foundation of all miracles. 'Why,' said he, 'if you should fill your oven with stones and have sufficient faith to believe they would come out buscuit, they would do so.'

'Well,' said the good woman dubiously, 'I have a good oven now and I don't know as we shall ever have a better chance to try it.' So she hurried out to the rock pile and got her apron full of stones about the size of biscuits and put them in the oven. She waited about twenty minutes and then opened the door, but the metamorphosis hadn't occurred.

'There!' she exclaimed a little tartly, 'they're stones and I knew they'd be.'

'You knew they'd be stones, did you?' queried the Major choking back a laugh. 'Well, that accounts for it. You didn't have the necessary faith,' and he went chuckling up the road.

Those Percys are a peculiar lot. There was one of them, an aunt of Dean's, who married a Russian Jew by the name of Dart. I guess he led her a most uncomfortable life. At any rate, she didn't appear to take it much to heart when he was finally arrested for smuggling and sent to prison for a

long term of years. He died there. He and his wife had one child, Simon, who keeps the store at the Corner. He is a most peculiar fellow, apparently uniting the Percy melancholy with the penurious grasping of his father—a most unhappy combination. They used to say that he starved and abused his mother; at any rate, the poor woman finally went crazy and was taken to the Insane Hospital at Augusta, where she afterwards died."

"I never heard that before," said Raymond with evident interest.

"It was before your day and generation. Simon has been in trade at the Corner for over thirty years. He took the store from his mother, who carried it on for a few years after his father was sent to prison. It is nearly twenty years since she died, and she was at the hospital six or seven years. It has been a long time since the State Insane Asylum has been without a Percy. Dean has an aunt, an uncle and a sister there now."

"That's certainly news to me," said Raymond in surprise.

"Well, there is very little said about it nowadays, though all the older people in town are acquainted with the facts."

"What surprises me most," said Raymond, "is to learn that Simon Dart is connected with that family."

"Well, it's a fact, though one that his mother's people have never felt very proud of. With all its peculiarities the Percy family has been and is one of the best in town. Its members have been upright, Christian people, and no one could wish for better neighbors."

"I am glad that you have told me these things, grand-father," said Raymond as they drove into the yard at home.
"It will give me a new interest in the old families of the town.

Besides, your stories have cured a fit of the blues in me. The rasping down that lawyer gave me was not very pleasant."

"I thought as much," responded Mr. Benson with a cheerful smile. "It seemed to me that it would be a good plan to set you to thinking about something else."

Late the following afternoon, as Raymond was getting the mail at the Corner post office, he was attracted by a notice on the little bulletin board in front of the boxes, around which a curious and excited group were gathered. Elbowing his way to the front he read the following:

\$100 REWARD!!

FOR THE ARREST AND CONVICTION, OR INFORMA-TION THAT WILL LEAD TO THE ARREST AND CON-VICTION, OF ANY PARTIES BRINGING SMUGGLED GOODS INTO THE TOWN OF CHESTNUT.

JAMES REEVES,
Collector of Customs.

"Well, I declare!" said Raymond. "I never knew before that the government had a fund set aside for that purpose."

"That offer doesn't really come from the government," said Joel Webber quietly, as he drew him aside.

"Whom does it come from?"

"Citizens of this town. I surmise your grandfather Benson may have put in something towards it. You see Chestnut people were thoroughly interested in the trial of old Pete Atkins, and were very anxious to see him convicted. None of them looked for anything else, consequently they were terribly disappointed when the old fellow was acquitted yesterday. They had hoped that he would be sent to Thomaston, and that the town would thus become well rid of him. After he was

cleared of the arson charge, a number of our leading citizens met in a room at the Crawford house and talked the matter over. They decided that the only way left for transporting him would be to convict him of smuggling. All felt confident that he had been in the business for years, and that the man Gambier was one of his confederates in it. If they could only fix that crime upon him Uncle Sam would take precious good care of him for some time to come. With this purpose in view a purse, of one hundred dollars was made up. A committee of the meeting waited upon Mr. Reeves, the collector of customs, and easily persuaded him to take charge of the reward. He has been trying to trap Pete for the last three or four years, but the old fellow has always eluded him."

"I think this will bring him, if he keeps on at the business," said Raymond, confidently.

"I think so, too," responded Joel, "I tell you, this reward has created a good deal of excitement in town. It was posted here late yesterday afternoon by one of the deputy collectors, who rode out from Bolton with the printed bills. At five o'clock this morning a strong party was on its way from here to Letter K. to examine Amos Dole's old camp at Bower Brook, and the vicinity around it. It is believed that old Pete has carried on his smuggling operations somewhere near there. A few of the party got back a little while ago. The others are going to camp right there and continue the search. They mean to push matters pretty vigorously from this time forth."

"What did they find at the camp?"

"Nothing out of the way. Old Ike Wallace and a Frenchman named Ganot were shaving cedar shingles there for Simon

Dart. He has a market for them somewhere and ships them away. It's a business he's carried on for some years past."

"How did Ike and the Frenchman receive the boys?"

"Very handsomely. They invited the whole crowd to take dinner with them in the camp, and really got up quite a spread. Old Ike is a pretty good cook when he lays himself out."

"Did the boys notice anything suspicious about the camp?"

"Not a thing. Amos Dole was with them, and he said it looked just as it did when he lumbered there, except that there wasn't anything in it. He built the camp and says there certainly wasn't anything wrong about it today. Ike Wallace was terribly bitter against old Pete, and was sorely disappointed to learn that he was acquitted. He said he had not seen anything of the old villain while he had been working at the camp, but that he would keep his eyes open and let the boys know if he noticed anything suspicious."

"Do you suppose he will?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. He hates old Pete Atkins just as badly as any of us, and will do all he can to help run him to earth."

"Well, I hope we may succeed in doing it," said Raymond as he left the store. "It looks more like it than it ever has before," he added.

Instead of driving home at once, Raymond continued down the cross road back of Cobe Hersom's shop, which stood on one of the four corners, and presently found himself in front of Simon Dart's store. It was a plain, unpretentious, story and a half building. Originally it had been painted a light yellow with white trimmings. The ravages of time, however, had robbed it of most of its primitive color, which clung to it now only in isolated patches, giving it a peculiarly unkempt and dingy appearance. The basement of the building, which was used for storage purposes, extended into the side of a steep embankment. It was from this, the older inhabitants said, that a great deal of earth had been taken when the cross road was continued beyond the Corner, and Simon's father, with an eye to economy, had purchased it, thereby avoiding the expense of digging a cellar. The plan worked very well, except as regarded the store front, where the sills stood over six feet above the level of the road. Here a deep platform was built, reached from the road by a flight of broad steps. Raymond noticed that the space under this platform was used by Simon for storing empty boxes. It was very nearly filled with a miscellaneous collection of them. One end of the platform was boarded up, while the other had been left open to serve as a door. Near this Raymond observed a large, empty dry goods box resting upon its side with its open part next the store. "That's almost big enough for a camp," he soliloquized. Going upon the platform he saw that its flooring was laid in joist with open spaces between nearly an inch in width. Having noted these points he entered the store.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Benson. Beautiful day we've had," said Simon, with an affable smirk, as he stood nervously rubbing his hands behind the counter. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I'll have half a pound of that best black tea."

"Will that be all?"

"Yes, all tonight."

In a short time the tea was done up, and Raymond was on his way home with it. "I believe I have found the key to old Pete Atkins's operations," he muttered, "and it will not be my fault if I do not unlock their mysteries."

CHAPTER XIII.

A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR.

The following day Raymond was up bright and early, as was his custom, attending to his duties about the farm. Among these was the feeding of the hens. Although grandfather Benson was not a poultry enthusiast, or, as his neighbors would have expressed it, had never been afflicted with the "hen fever," he could, nevertheless, show one of the finest flocks of fowls in Chestnut. The latest additions to his poultry yard were three beautiful white Leghorns, which had been presented to him by a friend in Bolton. They were of the purest blood and he felt no little pride in them.

For many years Plymouth Rocks had held undisputed sway in the poultry yard at Benson Farm. Even when the place had gone out of the hands of the family, no change had been made in the character of the denizens of the hen-yard. The same type had been faithfully perpetuated. For flesh grandfather Benson stoutly maintained that no fowls could compare with them. He had formerly been equally strenuous regarding their egg-laying abilities, but the arguments of his Bolton friend had induced him half to believe that after all the Leghorns might excel in this respect. He was not prepared to concede this point, however, without a fair test of the relative merits of the two breeds. The contest had been

in progress about a fortnight with the Leghorns somewhat in the lead. Still grandfather Benson was not ready to admit their superiority. He believed that the Plymouth Rocks had greater "staying abilities," and that, given sufficient time, they would certainly prove themselves to be more profitable fowls than their smaller and better looking rivals.

As Raymond entered the hen house with a peck measure well filled with cracked corn and mixed grain, he was startled by the sudden appearance of a long slim-backed little animal upon the girt joist just above the row of nests.

"My gracious! A weasel!" he exclaimed excitedly, throwing his measure of grain upon the floor and hastily seizing a small stick that leaned against one of the roosts. "I begin to see why those Leghorns have been gaining so fast. This sly fellow has been disposing of the Plymouth Rock eggs. They're larger, and he likes them better. Well, he ought to be a good judge, and will certainly be a strong witness for grandfather.

With these reflections, Raymond aimed a swift blow at the weasel which had run along the girt to the corner of the building. He felt sure that he was about to annihilate him, but, to his great surprise and chagrin, the little animal eluded his blow and doubling upon his course with lightning rapidity, ran along the girt in the opposite direction, leaped to the floor and disappeared through the door, leaving Raymond to look after him in open-mouthed amazement.

"Well, I never saw the beat of that," he exclaimed, when he had recovered somewhat from his surprise. "I thought I had him sure when I got him into that corner. I don't see for the life of me how he avoided that blow. He was quicker than a flash. That's the fellow who has been making away with the eggs in here, beyond a doubt; but it's very strange that we have never found any shells. Perhaps, though, the hens have disposed of them. It will never do in the world to have such a visitor here. He'll eat up all the profits on the poultry. Let me see; what can I do for him?"

For a moment Raymond stood in a deep study; then his face suddenly lighted up, as a plan for the weasel's capture came to his mind. "I have it!" he exclaimed. "I'll set one of those muskrat traps for him."

To plan was almost always to execute with Raymond, and in a short time the cruel little trap was carefully set upon the centre of the girt.

"He will have to run along here to reach the nests," was Raymond's reflection, "and when he does that he will be pretty sure to get into the trap. He's quick, I know, but I'll warrant he won't be spry enough to get away from those jaws, if that spring has a chance to get in its work."

The thought of capturing the weasel elated Raymond not a little, and the next morning he was on hand at an early hour to look at his trap. Sure enough, it was sprung; but it was not the weasel that was in it. Stiff and cold upon the top of one of the nest boxes lay one of grandfather Benson's much prized Leghorn hens. She had been caught by both legs, close to the body, and had fallen from the girt, in her frantic struggles to free herself, and pulled the trap after her.

Raymond looked with amazed and doleful face upon the sad catastrophe that had followed his attempt at weasel trapping.

"Well I declare," he muttered, "I never thought any of the hens would get up there. Such an idea never entered my head. What in the world will grandfather Benson say? He thought an awful sight of those Leghorns. They were given him by General Dixon, and, besides, he was anxious to see whether they were better than Plymouth Rocks."

With this thought, Raymond took the dead hen from the trap, and carrying her out behind the stable proceeded to bury her. He found, however, that an unpleasant fact, even though the tangible evidence of it may be put out of sight, is not easily put out of mind. He was unable to keep from thinking of the unfortunate occurrence; it worried him not a little. His conscience reproached him for undertaking to conceal the matter.

"I'm acting the part of a coward, after having played the role of a fool," he muttered. "I deserve to be horsewhipped for the bungling way I managed that trap. If it was anybody but grandfather Benson who owned that hen, I'd be pretty apt to get a good thrashing. I won't be a sneak, though. I'll make a clean breast of the whole business."

Grandfather Benson was surprised, on coming into the stable a little later, to be met with the abrupt announcement from Raymond, "I've killed one of your Leghorn hens."

"Indeed, how did that happen?" he inquired with surprising carelessness.

Raymond briefly related the harrowing result of his attempt to catch the weasel. He paused uneasily at the close of his recital, expecting some words of censure from his grandfather, but they did not come. Instead of that the good man burst into a hearty laugh.

"Well, I must say that's a rather hard end for a trapping expedition," he said with a merry twinkle in his eye.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," said Raymond soberly.

"No doubt you don't; but it's just as well to laugh as to cry, isn't it?"

"Yes, but you've lost a nice Leghorn."

"Of course I'm sorry for that, but it couldn't be helped. The idea of a hen getting into that trap no doubt never entered your head. It was wholly an accident, though I think you must admit it was a somewhat ludicrous one."

"Yes, it was rather, I'll allow," said Raymond with a doleful smile.

"There's one thing I'm very proud of," said grandfather Benson with a touch of deep tenderness in his voice.

"What's that?"

"That my boy had the courage and manliness to come and tell me the whole story."

"But I don't deserve your praise at all. I started out to play the coward. When I first found that hen I took her out behind the stable and buried her with the intention of not saying a word to you about it."

"But you did."

"Yes, the more I thought about it, the meaner I felt. I made up my mind I never could look you in the face again as long as I lived, if I played the part of such a sneak."

"That was a noble victory, Raymond, after a hard struggle," said grandfather Benson in a tone of tender sympathy. "It was a contest for supremacy between temptation, and your innate sense of right; such battles determine the character of every boy, according as he wins or loses. They mean a great deal in this life; they decide whether a young man's career is to be clean and open, with nothing to conceal and nothing to be ashamed of, or whether it is to be one fond of darkness and afraid of the light. I feel proud of your

victory, my boy. You do not always take the right course; you are impulsive and sometimes headstrong; but when it comes down to a square, fair fight between manliness and meanness—between right and wrong,—I have always believed my boy brave enough of soul to win the good victory."

"Thank you, grandfather," said Raymond gratefully. "I am glad that you have confidence in me, and I shall try to

deserve it."

"I have been especially pleased with the course you have taken this morning, because I was expecting it, and you have not disappointed me."

"You were expecting it?" said Raymond in genuine surprise.

"Yes, I felt it was coming. I visited the hen house ahead of you this morning on my way to the barn. I saw the hen in your trap and knew at once that you had been after a weasel"

"And you never said a word about it?"

"No, I felt that you would tell me the whole story, and you see I wasn't mistaken about it," said grandfather Benson with an affectionate smile, "and now I wish you'd hitch the bay mare into the open buggy. I am going to the Corner, and it may be possible that I shall have to go to Bodge before I get back. If I shouldn't be back by supper time I wish you'd help Dudley with the milking."

"All right," responded Raymond and a little later grandfather Benson was on his way to the Corner.

"I am ever so glad I told him all," reflected Raymond, after he had gone. "How he would have despised me in his heart if I had been the coward I set out to be; but what is

more, how I should have despised myself! After all, I believe it is more important that a fellow should respect himself than that other people should respect him, though I believe that the second will surely follow the first as a matter of course. After all, we live the greater part of this life on the inside, and it is important, as grandfather says, that we should keep the apartments there clean and wholesome. If we do that, we must, as he says, 'open the windows of the soul and let the sunlight in.'"

The day passed slowly. Byer and Dud were engaged in building a split cedar fence about the piece of front field which had been broken up for the next year's potato crop. Raymond remained about the house to attend to the chores. After he had completed these he found the time hanging somewhat heavily upon his hands. He went to his den, and, getting out his box of traps, gave them a thorough overhauling.

"I will do some real trapping this winter," he reflected, as he packed them away again. "The trouble in the hen house will be a lesson to me not to begin too early, and in the wrong place."

A rather sickly smile stole over Raymond's face at this reflection.

"I was astonished to see how calmly grandfather took it. I never dreamed he knew anything about it—still, I don't believe that made much difference with him. He never does things as other men do; he's got more heart than most of them have."

With this reflection Raymond took from a small book-case near the bureau, Jane Porter's "Scottish Chiefs," and was soon deeply absorbed in the daring exploits of Sir William Wallace, Robert Bruce and other Highland heroes.

It was after dark when supper was over, and, milk pail in hand, Raymond started to follow Dud to the barn. As he came into the yard he noticed the outline of a team standing before the closed door of the stable.

"Halloo," he thought. "Grandfather's got back."

He was about to offer his assistance in putting up the horse when another team drove into the yard and grandfather Benson's voice called out:

"Whose team is this?"

"I don't know. I thought it was yours," responded Raymond.

"Where's Dudley?"

"He's milking."

"Well, I wish you'd go into the house and get the other lantern. We'll investigate this matter a little."

A few moments later Raymond returned from the kitchen with a lantern on his arm, and he and grandfather Benson walked along to the strange team. It was a side-bar buggy, drawn by a small black horse.

"I know that team," said Mr. Benson quietly. "It belongs to Charles Adams, the Bolton livery man. He bought that little horse of Dean Percy."

The top of the buggy to which the intelligent little animal was hitched was turned back, notwithstanding the sharp fall weather. Stretched out upon the seat, with his head resting upon one corner of it was a large, fine looking man. He wore a valuable fur overcoat; his head was bare, but a tall silk hat which lay in the bottom of the buggy showed what had covered it.

"Is he asleep?" asked Raymond as he flashed the lantern into his face.

"I should rather say he was in a drunken stupor," responded grandfather Benson in tones of deep disgust. "It's a sad sight to see a fine looking man like him in such a beastly condition," he added soberly.

"What shall we do with him?"

"We shall have to take him into the house. It would never do to leave him here."

Together they carried the limp and insensible man into the spare bed room, where, after pulling off his boots, they laid him on the bed, spread a few quilts and blankets over him, and left him to sleep off the overpowering effects of his potations.

"He won't wake up before morning," said grandfather Benson as they returned to the stable to take care of the horses. "He furnishes the most forcible kind of a temperance lecture," he added.

"I hope you don't believe me in need of the lesson it teaches," said Raymond a little anxiously.

"No indeed, my boy." was the hearty rejoinder. "I know that you have your faults, but I have never had the slightest fear that you would be other than a temperate man. The desire for liquor does not run in the Benson family. For that reason, perhaps, we are not deserving of so much credit for our total abstinence principles as the poor fellows who keep their lives temperate only by constantly fighting into subjection an inherent appetite for strong drink. So far as I know, the taste for liquor has never run in our family, nor do I think there are any of my immediate relatives who habitually use tobacco."

"The fellow in the house probably came here from the den of Pete Atkins," said Raymond. "It's a fair sample of the work he is doing." "I think very likely," returned Mr. Benson, "that is, if he got his liquor here in Chestnut."

By this time the horses were put up and Raymond hurried to the barn to help Dud with the milking, but the big fellow had nearly finished the work. A little later he and Raymond returned to the house with brimming milk pails, and shortly after, when the evening prayers were over, retired for the night.

The following morning, while grandfather Benson and the boys sat around the kitchen table, busily engaged in disposing of the hot buckwheat flapjacks which Mrs. Benson was frying on the large griddle over the stove, the stranger made his appearance. He had slept off his drunken stupor, and a careful toilet had made a vast change in his appearance. He looked decidedly sheepish and bewildered as he surveyed the group about the table, and realized that he had been the recipient of private hospitality—not to say charity. He paused in the doorway of the sitting room as if undetermined how to act, but grandfather Benson quickly relieved him of his embarrassment.

"Good morning," he said, pleasantly, as he motioned the traveler to a chair beside him. "How did you rest?"

"Very nicely, thank you," was the response. The ice thus cordially broken the stranger appeared to recover somewhat from his reserve and chatted pleasantly with the group about the table.

"What direction is Bolton from here?" he finally inquired.

"Where should you say?" was grandfather Benson's Yankee answer.

"In that direction," pointing towards the Corner.

"You are exactly turned around."

"And Bolton is in the opposite direction?"

"Yes."

"Well, I never should have thought it. The fact is, I wasn't just myself last night—a little mixed, I guess—my own fault—must have made a fool of myself, I know—talked like an insane man, didn't I?"

"No, you were not in a condition to say anything."

A look of intense relief came over the stranger's face.

"I can appreciate your kindness to me, sir, and I think I can assure you that the lesson this disgraceful experience has taught me will not be without good results."

"I certainly hope so," returned grandfather Benson, and no further reference was made to the stranger's state on the previous night.

"Is that gentleman your father?" asked the mysterious visitor of Raymond, as grandfather Benson turned away to assist Dud in harnessing his horse."

"No, my grandfather."

"And his name is Benson, isn't it?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"I inferred as much from that," said the stranger, pointing to the charred ruins of the barn. I read all about the trial in the newspapers, and if I am not mistaken, you are the young man who figured so prominently in it."

"Yes," said Raymond, with a flushed face, "I am the one. I suppose you gathered from what you read that I was the real villain in the case. The county attorney tried hard enough to make it appear that way."

"On the contrary," said the stranger, with an amused expression on his face, "I concluded that you were a pretty

decent kind of a fellow. That was your first experience in a court trial I take it."

"Yes, and I hope it will be the last."

"Well, I hope so, too; but a small part of the experience I have had in such trials would teach you not to mind what an opposing counsel said of you. If he should berate you with special vigor you would esteem it a high compliment.

"Are you a lawyer?"

"Not exactly," was the evasive response. "I'm a sort of lawyer's devil. I drum up business for the profession. You never had any doubt but Atkins burned that barn did you?"

"Not the slightest."

"Well, neither did I. The verdict was a surprise to me, and I guess it was to everybody who followed the case. There is no doubt but what Atkins is engaged in smuggling liquor across the line, is there?"

"Well, that seems to be the general opinion."

"They've offered a reward of a hundred dollars that is really aimed at him, haven't they?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you win it?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I believe you can do it. I am indebted to you and your people here for the hospitable manner in which you have used me. I assure you I am not insensible of your kindness. As a proof of this I am going to give you a tip that will be worth something to you. It is this: Watch Dart's store. If you do this at the proper time you may learn something that will be worth a hundred dollars to you. I think you are shrewd enough to grasp the point."

"I think so," said Raymond doubtfully; but if that tip is worth so much why don't you get the money yourself?"

"Circumstances render it impossible, but believe me, my boy, I have spoken to you in good faith. I should certainly be lacking in all sense of gratitude were I to do otherwise. You may act as you see fit, but time will surely show you the importance of what I have said to you."

By this time the stranger's horse was harnessed, and as he was about to resume his drive towards Bolton, he urged Mr. Benson to accept pay for his lodging and breakfast.

"I couldn't think of it," was the firm response. "I have never put a price upon the hospitalities of my house, and it's too late for me to begin now. You know it's hard for an old dog to learn new tricks," he added with a smile.

"But I was an utter stranger to you, with absolutely no claim upon you for your entertainment. I don't think it possible to repay your kindness to me with money, but I should really feel better, though none the less indebted to you, if you would let me reimburse you at least for the actual trouble and expense I have been to you."

"I can't break my rule," said Mr. Benson, "but if this experience is a benefit to your future I shall feel fully repaid."

"It certainly shall be," said the stranger as he climbed into the buggy and with a pleasant "good-bye" drove away in the direction of Bolton.

"Who do you suppose he was?" asked Raymond, when their involuntary guest was out of hearing.

"I haven't the slightest idea. I do not remember of ever having seen him before. He was evidently, though, an educated, intelligent man, and a close observer both of men and affairs. He appeared to know pretty much all about this county and its leading citizens, and was much interested in our development. He believed with me that no other section of New England has such magnificent resources, especially from an agricultural point of view. He thought it was a shame that we should be forced to carry our products to market over Canadian soil, and declared that a direct line of railroad through State of Maine territory, connecting Aroostook County with the city of Bangor, would be a great blessing to us all, and would insure a great future for this section."

"Do you believe that?"

"Most certainly, and so does every Aroostook citizen who has the interests of the county at heart."

"But do you suppose it will ever come?"

"I surely do, and when it does we shall see a growth and development right here in Aroostook County that will fairly rival that of the most thriving and enterprising sections of the West. That will be a great day for Aroostook, my boy. The products of our farms and forests will then find an easy outlet to the markets of the country. But that will not be all. We have some splendid water powers in the county that will certainly be utilized for manufacturing purposes. Our golden era is surely coming, Raymond, though perhaps we may not get the full dawn of it in my day."

"I didn't know you had contributed towards a reward for the capture of smugglers in this town," said Raymond very abruptly, changing the subject. He never wanted to entertain for a moment the sad thought that he should ever be without a grandfather Benson.

"I thought it advisable to do something of the kind," was the response. "I am convinced that the first step towards putting down the liquor traffic here in Chestnut will be to prevent the stuff from being smuggled across the line. That is the proper way to start a genuine, practical temperance reform movement in this town. Another advantage in so doing is that we enlist at the start the Federal officials, and they are never afraid to do their full duty in such cases. Local influences and fears do not affect them."

"Do you mean to say that local officers won't do their duty?"

"I mean to say just this: under our system of popular government, officials will not be much in advance of the public sentiment that creates them. It's well enough to lay down a theoretical standard for official virtue. Most reformers are fond of doing that. This very fact accounts for the greater part of their failures. They should establish those standards for popular sentiment, and when it comes up to them, officials will not be found one whit behind. The truth of the matter is that officials are seldom little better or little worse than their constituents. Especially is this the case in small localities, where the disaffection of a few men may be sufficient to secure their defeat at the next election. Under such circumstances they will be very careful to avoid, as far as possible, anything and everything that savors of aggressiveness."

"Do you think, then, that public sentiment is on the wrong side of great moral questions?"

"Not at all. I think the great popular heart is always for what it believes to be right, though nations, as well as individuals, have often been woefully wrong. I have no doubt that the great majority of the people of this county believe in temperance. In Maine I know the sentiment is overwhelmingly in its favor; but there are doubtless, even in our own State, many localities where the rum element is able to a large extent to control matters and more or less to direct

public sentiment, through the cry of 'personal liberty' and other equally fallacious doctrines. Officials elected in such places are not liable to be specially enthusiastic in suppressing the liquor traffic."

"But you don't think Chestnut is such a place, do you?"

"No, not exactly. The great majority of our people are at heart in favor of temperance; but they have not been willing to stand up boldly and fight for it. Those who oppose the prohibitory law, on the other hand, have been active and aggressive and have long been able to exert an undue influence in town affairs."

"People have been afraid of Pete Atkins, haven't they?"

"Yes, very many have not cared to incur his vindictive enmity, even when they have deeply deplored the evil he is doing."

"What cowardly selfishness!"

"People are very apt, my boy, to put the burden of public reforms upon other shoulders than their own. They believe in reform, but wish somebody else to do the reforming. In other words they are not willing to make any personal sacrifices for it. It is a good deal easier for them to condemn the officials for not doing their duty than it is to take hold and help them do it. A man can't do his whole duty to society by simply voting for what he believes to be right; the responsibilities of citizenship do not close with the polls. Officials, the best of them, are only human, and it is not to be wondered at if they are not very earnest in pushing a battle against active and aggressive opponents, when they find themselves without active and aggressive support. There are two kinds of influence in this world; one is positive, the other is nega-

tive. We've had altogether too much of the latter here in Chestnut."

"Why will the Federal officers be above such influences?"

"Because local considerations have no bearing whatever upon their tenure of office. It would not make any difference to the Custom House officials at Bolton what party succeeded in carrying the town. For this reason, and from the fact that they have the strong arm of the general government behind them, they are always ready to do their full duty in these matters and do it fearlessly. I believe it was a wise move for us to hitch them on as we did. The best citizens of Chestnut are becoming aroused as never before, to a determination that liquor selling shall be stopped in this town."

"Do you think they will be successful in stopping it?"

"I haven't the slightest doubt of it," was the smiling response, and Raymond went about his morning work with a conviction that his grandfather knew what he was talking about.

The remarks of the mysterious visitor had made a deep impression upon Raymond, and through all the work of the day, he was busily engaged in turning them over in his mind. He was convinced that the stranger knew more about Pete Atkins and his gang than he was willing to tell. On the other hand, if he had spoken sincerely, he had said enough to show that he entertained no friendly feelings toward them. The value of his "tip" was yet to be determined, but Raymond fully made up his mind that it would not be his fault if it was not ascertained in the near future.

CHAPTER XIV.

RAYMOND AND NED DO DETECTIVE WORK.

"You and I will have that reward, Ned."

It was Raymond Benson who spoke, and his words had a very electrifying effect upon Ned Grover, whom he had taken to his den for a confidential chat.

"You are not in earnest, are you?" he asked eagerly.

"I was never more so in my life, Ned. I feel morally certain that if you and I go about this thing in the right way, we shall get that hundred dollars."

"You don't really mean that we shall be able to secure the arrest and conviction of old Pete Atkins, do you?"

"That is just exactly what I mean."

"I don't see how."

"Well, I'll tell you how. I have been putting this and that together, and I think I am beginning to get at the inside of this thing. It is very evident that if old Pete is carrying on much of a smuggling business, or bringing anything across the line except the liquor he sells at his house, he must have a market for his wares. In other words, there must be some confederate on the Yankee side to take his goods and dispose of them. I am convinced that old Pete has such an ally, and I believe that I have discovered him."

"Who is he?"

"Simon Dart."

"Simon Dart!" exclaimed Ned in astonishment. "You must surely be mistaken, old fellow. He carries on his business altogether too openly to be engaged in that kind of work. I don't have a very high opinion of the fellow. In fact, I know he's a knave; but I think we must concede that he is no fool. Besides, with his father's fate before him, it isn't very likely that he would care to follow in his footsteps."

"That's just what he is doing, though, in my opinion. His very openness has disarmed suspicion. He is a thoroughbred scoundrel, depend upon it, Ned. It always makes me crawl when I go near him. There is something clammy about him."

"He is certainly an uncanny fellow," said Ned. "But I do not see what valid reason you have for suspecting him of being the receiver of old Pete's smuggled goods."

"There are a number of reasons, old fellow. In the first place, a good many more things go out of his store than ever come from Bolton. It seems strange to me now that the people of this town have not noticed it."

"If he keeps smuggled goods in stock, wouldn't it be an easy thing for the Custom House officers to search his store and establish the fact?"

"Perhaps so, but you see they have never suspected him. The fellow is shrewd and has played his part well. He must have, to throw the dust so completely in the eyes of the people of this town."

"Why don't you tell the officers of your suspicions and have them search his store?"

"And lose that reward? Not much, my boy. Besides, there is one thing I want, too, a good deal more than the hundred dollars, and that is the arrest and conviction of old Pete Atkins. I'd give all I possess to be able to rid the town of that old reprobate. If the officers should descend on Dart, Pete would take to the woods and hide there till the storm blew over. In the meantime he would contrive to keep his wife and boys supplied with liquor, and they would continue the business just the same. No, my idea is to commence at the other side of this matter when we begin to draw in our nets. The first fish we want is old Pete. When we once get him in the meshes, it will not be so much trouble to secure Dart."

"You are right there," said Ned, "but you have only given me reason for believing that Dart is a confederate of old Pete's, and that is by no means a conclusive one. I think your experience with the court has shown you that it wouldn't have much weight there."

"Well, Dart has always said a good word for old Pete at every opportunity, and is always endeavoring to excuse his knavery by saying that he is a generous and obliging neighbor. During the recent trial he was the old fellow's right hand man. He secured his lawyers and found all the witnesses for him. In my opinion he put up that alibi that finally cleared the old fellow. He had a long talk with Gambier before the trial, which I think had a great deal to do with the man's obstinate refusal to tell who was with him the night of the fire."

"I didn't know that."

"Few people did, but it's a fact, all the same. I'll tell you another thing. I believe that Amos Dole's old camp is the headquarters for Pete and his gang, and that Ike Wallace and the Frenchman with him are members of it. Their shaving

shingles is only a blind, as is also their cordial treatment of visitors to the camp. It is doubtless true that they are working for Dart, but not at shingle making. He and old Pete Atkins are partners in quite a different business; and you and I will prove it before many days."

"But the party from the Corner took dinner at the camp and didn't see anything about it the least suspicious."

"There may have been no smuggled goods on hand at that time. If there were, you may depend upon it they were not far from that camp."

"What is your plan, Raymond? I'm with you through thick and thin, in anything you may do to trap old Pete. No one can be more anxious than I am to rid the town of him."

"My idea is this, Ned. Those fellows must land their stuff at Dart's store in the early morning hours. It would be hard to imagine a building better adapted for such work. It is back of the Corner, and shut off from it by the little hill. There is not another building anywhere around it, except the church. You see, Simon owns the land on each side of the road, with the exception of the church lot and grave-yard, clear down to the Bell woods, and it's fully half a mile through those. My idea is that the smuggled goods are brought in a team from Letter K to the point where those woods, which run in a quartering direction, make out on the county road, more than a mile above the Corner. Here they are unloaded and carried through the woods to the cross road about a quarter of a mile or so below the church yard. They are then loaded onto another team and carried to Dart's store about two or three o'clock in the morning, when everybody about the Corner is asleep. Now my idea is for you and me to be at Dart's store and see a load of these goods delivered. That would give us testimony enough at the start to convict both Simon and Pete."

"That's an ingenious scheme, certainly," said Ned, "but I don't believe Simon will be accommodating enough to furnish us quarters for that purpose."

"You don't understand me. I said at the store, not in it. My idea is for you and me to camp in a big dry goods box there is under the store platform and await developments."

"But we'd freeze to death," objected Ned, shivering at the thought. "Here it is the last of November."

"We should want to go protected from the cold. Each of us will want an extra pair of warm woolen stockings, and a buffalo overcoat outside of our regular one. In addition to that we ought to have a couple of thick robes. With such an outfit we need have no fear of the cold."

"Yes, we should be all right on that score," said Ned.
"But how can we be sure what night they will bring goods there? We might watch there a whole week and not discover anything."

"I have thought of that," said Raymond, "but I don't see any way to avoid it. We must take our chances, and watch until they do come. I have an idea, however, that they select the darkest nights for these, trips. It would be well, anyway, for us to make a beginning on such a one."

A few days later the boys drove to the Corner about midnight and put their team in one of the sheds back of the church, carefully blanketing the horse for protection against the cold. The night was pitchy black, but a dark lantern assisted them in finding their way. They had concluded, after some discussion, to take one along with them, deciding that, as Simon would probably be in bed, they would run less risk

of discovery from its light than they otherwise would from the noise they might make in stumbling over the boxes. event showed this conclusion to be correct. With the assistance of the lantern the boys were enabled to reach the box without disturbing in the least the silence of the night. They found it somewhat more cramped than they had anticipated, but it was nicely sheltered from the wind, and warmer than they had dared to hope. They soon had their robes spread, and were comfortably settled for the night. At first they thought of taking turns watching, but finally decided that both should remain awake. "It will be so much more cheerful," said Raymond, "if we keep each other company. Besides, we can sleep all day in my den if we want to. I will tell grandmother not to wake us. I tell you, old fellow," he added, enthusiastically, "We are on the right track, and if we only hang to it long enough we will certainly win. I think we had better plan to be together as much as possible while we are working on this matter."

"Yes, that's a good idea," assented Ned, "but my soul! isn't this just a trifle lonesome, though? Hear that wind moaning up in the graveyard. How dismal it sounds. I remember that old aunt Ruth who used to live on the other side of the graveyard, always said that the spirits of the dead were talking when the wind blew like that."

"Aunt Ruth who?" asked Raymond, "I never knew that there was a house below the cemetery."

"Yes, that old story and a half stable of Simon's behind the store here was the one."

"I always thought that it never could have been intended for a stable."

"Well, it wasn't. Uncle Jerry Hope, who cleared up the

fields below the graveyard, built it when he was a young man.

That was nearly eighty years ago. His wife, aunt Ruth Hope, survived him ten years, and it's nearly that since she died. Poor old lady! I used to pity her. When uncle Jerry died, she supposed that all he owed was a few hundred dollars to Simon Dart. That would have left his widow enough to have kept her in comfort the rest of her days. When Simon produced his notes, however, they amounted to three thousand dollars, one for twelve hundred and the other for eighteen hundred. Of course it was a terrible blow to aunt Ruth. Uncle Jerry was a man who had never let her know much about his business affairs, but she never had an idea but what he had property enough to pay what he owed and leave a snug little balance."

"Don't you suppose those notes were forgeries?" asked Raymond, who had been intensely interested in this narrative.

"No, aunt Ruth knew that uncle Jerry had borrowed something from Simon, though she had never dreamed it was so much, and was unable for the life of her to think where the money had gone to. Besides, no man could possibly have imitated uncle Jerry's signature. I don't believe that there was another one in the world anything like it."

"How long had these notes been running?"

"Oh, ten or fifteen years."

"Didn't Mr. Hope pay anything at all on them during that time?"

"No. Aunt Ruth said he wanted to take them up once or twice, for she remembered to have heard him speak of it, but Simon said he was in no hurry whatever for the money and advised him to put what he had into improvements on the farm. Uncle Jerry followed his advice and bought the large mowing field opposite the church, and also a good slice of the Bell woods. He had great faith in Simon who at that time was a deacon in the church and one of its pillars."

"Yes, that's Simon," said Raymond. "I believe that he has served the devil in the livery of heaven for a good many years. Do you know, from just what little you have told me, I am convinced that the figures on those notes were raised. Simon probably wrote them himself and imposed upon the confiding old man by putting the amounts in figures instead of writing them out in words. Who witnessed them?"

"Simon's mother."

"That's it exactly. She became dead in a legal sense when she was taken to the insane asylum, and Simon had uncle Jerry in his power."

"What do you think he did?" asked Ned with evident interest.

"I think he added a cipher to the figures of both those notes, thus increasing the amount of each a thousand dollars. I have no doubt but that, when uncle Jerry signed them, one was for a hundred and twenty and the other for a hundred and eighty dollars."

"My gracious! I believe you are right!" exclaimed Ned excitedly.

"I have no doubt of it," said Raymond. "What surprises me is to think that none of the townspeople ever thought of it."

"They doubtless would if they had entertained the same opinion of Simon Dart that you do, but they didn't. They looked upon him at that time as a paragon of virtue and piety. They are better acquainted with him now."

"Isn't it strange that people will be so blind?"

"After Simon took the farm, everybody was praising him for his generous treatment of aunt Ruth. He allowed her the rent of the house free as long as she lived, and gave her a great many things from the store."

"He probably had a sneaking feeling that he ought to allow her at least the interest on what belonged to her," said Raymond, indignantly.

"Very likely. The neighbors always kept her supplied with wood and were continually carrying things to her, so that with the knitting she did she managed to get along very comfortably. But she was a queer old soul. As she grew older she partially lost her mind, and had all sorts of strange notions. When the wind blew she used to say it was the spirits of the dead in the graveyard, warning sinners to repentance, and was positive she could distinguish the voice of uncle Jerry above all the others. I remember visiting her with mother when I was a little fellow and hearing her talk like that. It made the goose flesh stand out all over me. I dreamed of ghosts and goblins that night. I was very careful not to visit her again. There was something weird to me about her, and I always had an uneasy feeling that she only half belonged to this world anyway."

"Poor soul! Very likely she didn't," said Raymond, sympathizingly.

"Simon's treatment of uncle Jerry didn't look just right, but nobody was able to put a finger upon anything that was wrong. You see he is a shrewd fellow and always covered his tracks. A few years ago Charles Amsden, an old soldier, gave him some pension money to keep for him. When he came after it Simon insisted that he had paid it back to

him two months before that. Amsden knew better than that, and brought suit against Simon to recover the amount which Dart very frankly admitted had been given into his keeping. Considerable sympathy was awakened in town for Amsden, and the opinion was very generally expressed that Dart had swindled him. When the case came to trial, though, Simon exhibited to the court a receipt for the full amount signed by Amsden himself. Everybody was dumbfounded. Amsden stoutly maintained that he had never signed any such a receipt, but his signature was shown to be genuine. The body of the receipt Simon admitted was in his own handwriting. He had made it out and got Amsden to sign it, he said, simply as a matter of business, and to protect himself from any future demand that might be made upon him.

"Well, that was proper, if he paid the money."

"That's the point. Lots of people in this town don't believe he ever did pay it."

"How did he come by the receipt then?"

"Easily enough; by looking ahead a little. You see he never goes into anything of that kind without carefully considering how he's going to get out of it if occassion requires. If he hadn't followed that plan he would probably have been detected in some of his sharp dealings long before this. Nobody was ever known to get the best of him on anything; and the number of men he's shaved in this town would be hard to find out. Some of them never wanted to make much talk about it. Most men don't care to have it known that they have been outwitted in business transactions, especially when the fellow who has duped them has been sharp enough to keep out of reach of the law. When Simon took Amsden's money he meant to cheat him out of it. Charles was an

ignorant fellow, and when Simon told him that it would be necessary to sign a paper certifying that he had made Dart the keeper of his money the poor fellow believed it was all right. Simon wrote out such a statement on a long sheet of paper and Amsden signed it near the bottom of the page. When he had gone Simon cut the agreement off the top, wrote a receipt for the money over the signature and put it away in his safe to protect him in his knavery when Amsden should demand his money."

"But, of course Amsden stated these facts to the court."

"Yes, but he had no proof of them."

"Of course not; nothing but his word."

"It was shown that he had been seen with Dart on the day his money was alleged to have been paid back to him, and that he had been drinking quite heavily. The presumption was, you see, that he had gone on a spree with his money and lost it or blown it in."

"Yes, I see. The fact that he was an intemperate man went against him."

"It certainly did, though I don't see what case he would have had against Dart under any circumstances."

"I should have thought the church would have been anxious to get rid of Simon."

"Well, it was, but he was shrewd enough to save them any trouble in the matter by withdrawing. You know that lot back of the store?"

"The one where the stable stands?"

"Yes, well Simon swindled that out of old Jason Dolliver, whose land joined his. There was no record of the line between the lots, but it was generally understood to run very close to the back end of the store. Jason had always assumed

that such was the case, and Simon's father never disputed it; neither did Simon either for that matter, until he began to think would use uncle Jerry's house for a stable, when it finally came into his possession. Then he saw that he would need some land to put it on. There is no doubt but what Mr. Dolliver would have sold him whatever he needed at a reasonable price. That wasn't Simon's way of doing business, however. He never bought anything he could secure in any other way. Uncle Jerry Hope was the only man at the Corner who would have been an authority on that line; but his memory was failing, and he couldn't recollect anything about it. Simon reminded him however that he helped make the survey, and that he would surely remember, if he thought the matter over, that the granite boulder sixty feet in the rear of the store came right in the middle of the line. For more than a year he would drop in and refresh uncle Jerry's memory on this point until the old gentleman really believed that he had helped run the line and remembered just where it was. When the matter finally came before the courts uncle Jerry's testimony was so positive that it won the case for Simon and he secured the lot."

"Well, I declare! He's a deeper scoundrel than I suspected; but how did you come to know about this?"

"Aunt Ruth told father how Simon and uncle Jerry used to talk the matter over. The dear old lady never suspected there was anything wrong; but it didn't take father long to see through the hole in the grindstone. However Simon was in possession of the land and he holds it to this day."

"Do you know, Ned, what you told me only makes me the more anxious to get that scoundrel upstairs in limbo?"

"I'm with you there," responded Ned; and then the boys

lay for a long time in silence, each busy with his own thoughts. The night wore away slowly. It seemed to them that they had never before realized what an immense amount of time there was in sixty minutes, They felt cramped and stiff when they finally left their box at about four o'clock in the morning, having reluctantly arrived at the conclusion that no smuggled goods would be delivered at Simon's store after that hour.

"I am just as anxious as any one to rid the town of old Pete Atkins," said Ned disgustedly as they drove home, "but I don't hanker after very much sport of this sort."

"Oh, well," responded Raymond encouragingly, "we can't expect to accomplish everything in a minute. If we succeed in breaking up old Pete's gang, we have got to show some perseverance and overcome some obstacles. Just think." he added enthusiastically, "what a feather it would be our caps to rid the town of that old scoundrel, and get the hundred dollars reward. All we've got to do is to show a little pluck and persistency, and we are sure to win the prize."

Ned's drooping spirits were revived by this encouraging talk and the next evening he was ready and anxious to watch again. But they were once more doomed to disappointment. The night wore slowly away without a sign of old Pete or any one else. When the boys drove home in the morning their courage was at low ebb and Ned was earnestly in favor of abandoning this part of the program. Raymond was unwilling to do this, however, and after considerable argument persuaded his companion to watch with him one more night, agreeing not to ask him to go again in case their vigils should continue to prove fruitless. He mentally determined, how-

ever, to keep up the watch alone. But this time their patience was rewarded. About two o'clock in the morning a heavy wagon drove up before Dart's store and the driver, alighting, pounded upon the window of Simon's room over the store with a long bamboo fish pole, which he drew from under the benches on the platform. A moment later the window was raised, and a voice which the boys readily recognized as Simon's inquired cautiously, "Is that you, Pete?"

"Yes," responded the familiar tones of the Chestnut rumseller. "Come down and help me unload."

The window closed, and in a few moments the boys, who were breathless with suppressed excitement, heard the front door open and Simon step out upon the platform.

"You are early," he said. "I didn't expect you before three."

"Well, I got a prompt start from the camp and thought I had better poke right through."

"Is this all there is?"

"No, there's another load in the scoop."

"Hear that. 'The scoop,'" whispered Raymond to Ned.

"I felt sure they had a hiding place somewhere. It's a dugout and not very far from the camp."

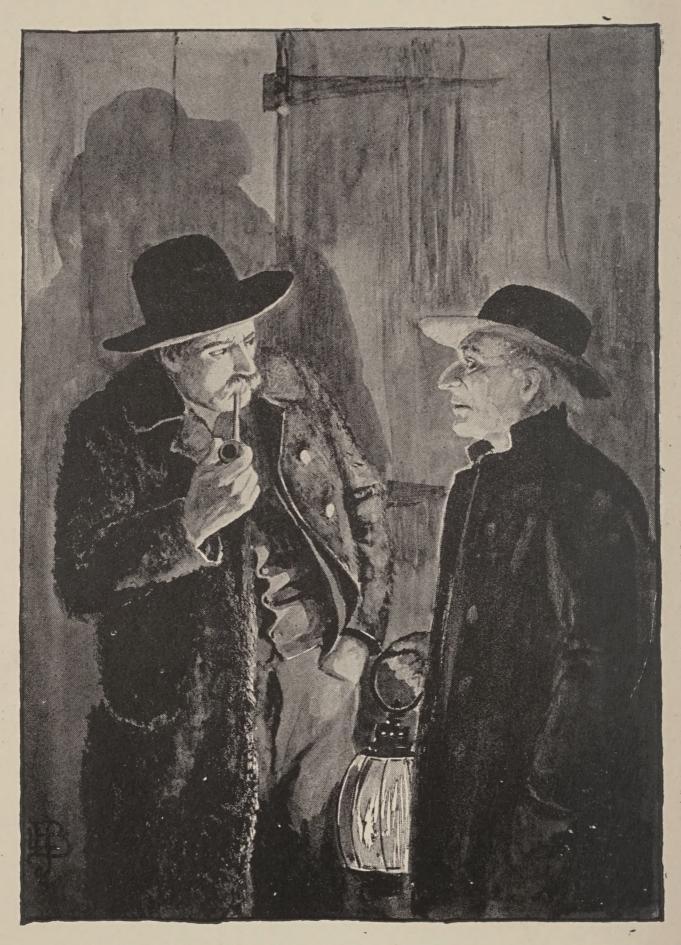
"Sh-h," said Ned, warningly.

"How much have you got on?" asked Simon.

"Not a heavy load," answered Pete, "and it's all in this big box. It's going to be quite a lift for us to get it down cellar, but I guess we can do it. Lend a hand."

"I should think they had a piano by the way they grunt," whispered Ned, as the two men bore their burden into the store.

Raymond made no reply to this. As soon as the door



"You and I will have to dissolve partnership" (Page 217)

closed behind Pete and his companion, he threw open the slide of the dark lantern and stole silently from the box, whispering to Ned to remain where he was. In a moment more he returned to the box, bringing a whip in his hand.

"This will prove an important witness for us later on, old boy," he said as he handed it to Ned.

"I should say as much," was the enthusiastic response.

"Raymond, you are the longest headed fellow I ever knew."

The whip was a whalebone. Just above the handle was a band of German silver upon which was engraved the name "P. Atkins."

Raymond had barely regained his place in the box before Simon and Pete came out upon the platform again in very earnest conversation.

"It's no use, Sime, I'm afraid you and I will have to dissolve partnership. This vicinity is getting too hot for me. Everybody is after me now, since the Custom House officers put up that reward. I think I've shown you, on more than one occasion, that I'm no coward, but I tell you I haven't any desire to spend ten or fifteen years in prison, not if I know myself. I'd a good deal rather play the respectable citizen and settle down to farming, though the profits would seem mighty small in comparison. But I've laid up something in these years of prosperity, and the income of it would help out a good deal. I shouldn't have to do my farming alone by any means."

"Bah," said Simon impatiently. "I never thought to see you so weak kneed. That trial seems to have taken all the courage out of you. Brace up, man."

"I tell you Sime, that was a closer shave than I like. If it hadn't been for the alibi you trumped up, I should have been in Thomaston now, with no immediate prospect of leaving there. I thought sure I was gone when that boy was testifying. Curse him! I've got an account to settle with him. He's been the cause of all this trouble. Everything would have been all right if he hadn't crossed my path.

"You brought the whole thing on yourself by your own idiotic folly," said Dart coldly. "How many times have I advised you never to sacrifice business interests to personal feelings. What did the life of that dog amount to? What would the lives of a hundred dogs amount to, compared to the success of our ventures? I would give five hundred of the best dogs this town ever saw if we could be back on as good footing as we were when you burned Benson's barn."

"Well, I don't intend to be run over by any one," said Pete, sullenly.

"Run over. Bah! You haven't the balance of self-control of a sensible louse. This isn't the first time that you've come near upsetting everything by your rattle-brained malice. Then there was that Bangor detective you bought up last week. You were lucky enough to get a twist on him and choke him off, but you showed very poor judgment in filling him up with whiskey. There was no need of that, and it came very near making us lots of trouble. The fellow got beastly drunk and brought up in an insensible condition in Andrew Benson's dooryard. They kept him over night there. I heard Dud Rich telling somebody about it here in the store yesterday. I never had anything startle me so. I thought you had better judgment than to act like that. It's a wonder the fellow didn't get to talking and give the whole thing away. He would, I guess, if his tongue hadn't been too thick to wag. I tell you, Pete, such carelessness as that will

certainly ruin us. You must be more cautious, and above all control you temper. I can hate as strongly as any man, but I don't sacrifice my business interests to my likes or dislikes. I'm not quite so big a fool as that, thank heaven.

"No, you're a deep one, you are," was Pete's sarcastic rejoinder. You haven't the feelings of a man in your whole carcass. You've bottled yourself up your whole life until now it wouldn't seem natural for you to let yourself out on anything. All you can do is scheme, and I honestly believe you'd let anybody rub your nose in the dirt if it would help you carry a point. Your great hold is swindling somebody that haint so bright as you are. I'm not your style. When a man treads on my toes he's going to get kicked for it. I don't claim my doings have always been open and above board, but one thing is certain, I never was mean enough to cheat a poor old woman out of her home."

"No, but you came pretty near burning old man Graves out of his."

"Well, I had cause for it. If he'd left me alone I should never have troubled him. I think I showed him, in a forcible sort of way, that it was a pretty good plan to mind his own business."

"Oh, yes, no doubt. Now I should like to know what you meant by my cheating an old woman out of her home."

"Oh, you do, hey? I don't 'spose you can possibly imagine. See here, Sime, it's all right to play the virtuous citizen with other folks, but it won't go down with me. I'm no spring chicken, and don't you think I am. You must imagine I'm green not to know how you got hold of the Hope place."

"I came into possession of it legally, and have papers to prove it."

"No doubt. You have papers to prove most anything you take a notion to; but that sort of bluff don't go with me, understand that."

"How many people have you made this kind of talk to?"

"What do you take me for?"

"I used to think you were a man I could rely on, but the way you've been acting of late has led me to think that I may have been mistaken. Just bear one thing in mind, Pete Atkins, you are in my power. A few words from me would send you to prison for a long term of years. Don't forget that fact."

"But you wouldn't dare to speak that word, for you know mighty well that you would go along to bear me company if you did. I don't believe you are any more anxious to live in a cage than I am."

"My dear man, you are laboring under a sad delusion. There is not a particle of evidence by which you could show to a court that I have ever had any connection whatever with your affairs. I have looked out for that, I can assure you."

"See here, Sime," said Pete, fiercely, "You have had a chance to become pretty well acquainted with me in the past few years, and I swear to you that if you ever go back on me, I'll have your life for it."

"Come, come, don't get so excited," said Simon in a conciliatory tone, evidently not liking the intense and vigorous earnestness of Pete's threat. "You know very well that I would never betray you. Haven't I always stood by you through thick and thin? What possible reason have you to ever look for treachery on my part?"

"I didn't like your talk about my being in your power. It didn't sound right."

"You know very well I didn't mean anything by it. You and I are just made to work together. I can do the planning, and you can do the work. Neither of us can get along without the other. We must hang together. It's bad business though when you make foolish breaks that jeopardize all my plans. You have energy and pluck enough to make this thing a success as long as we wish to continue it, if you will only exercise a little cool-headed common sense. That business at Benson's, though, was the most foolish thing you ever did. It thoroughly disgusted me. You acted like a lunatic.

"See here, Sime," sneered Pete, "you might just as well quit your preaching. It don't work with me. It was a habit you picked up while you was running the church, but you oughter have left it off when you got into better business."

"I think a fellow whose brainless folly has sacrificed a valuable man like Jean Gambier deserves to be preached to," returned Dart bitterly. "I tell you I had a hard time to persuade that man not to turn State's evidence. If he had the jig would have been up for both of us."

"That was a great piece of work, Sime," said Pete in a mollified tone. "I've often wondered how you came it over him so slick."

"I told him," said Simon with a thin chuckle, "that I had a private understanding with the Governor and would get him pardoned out in six months. I said that after that you and I would work together in the woods and let him run the store; that both of us were convinced that he was true blue

and would rather die than go back on us. He was wavering and uncertain when I went to see him, but after that nothing could induce him to speak. There is little doubt but what, if he had done so, the court would have dealt more leniently with him. In some respects I think he is the most gullible man I have ever known."

"That was neatly done. I always said you had a great head, Sime," was Pete's admiring comment upon this recital. "Well, here's a pretty go," he added as he climbed into the wagon.

"What's the matter?" asked Simon, hurriedly.

"I've lost my whip."

"Your whip?"

"Yes, it isn't here."

"Are you sure you had it?"

"Yes, I'm positive I did. I used it back in the woods."

"Well, that's probably where you lost it. Here, take my lantern and hunt for it when you go back."

"I tell you, it would be a bad thing if that is found," said Pete anxiously.

"Why?"

"My name's on it."

"Your name on it! What in the world do you carry a whip like that on these trips for? All is, we must find it. Here, I'll go with you." The two drove slowly off turning the lantern first to one side of the road, and then to the other. When they had passed out of sight and hearing, the boys hurried forth from their place of concealment. It was evident that they were very much elated over what they had heard.

"Thank heaven, we've got through camping here," said Ned, gleefully, as he gathered up the robes.

"Yes," added Raymond, "and we have the inside track for that reward."

"What shall we do now?"

"Well, I think we had better do a little detective work at the other end of this business. I should like very much to see that 'scoop' Pete spoke of."

"So should I."

"We shan't want to do any thing, though, until we have thought the whole matter over, and carefully laid our plans."

"Of course not; that would be foolish."

"The men who are helping Pete in his smuggling work are probably rough, desperate fellows, and it would be apt to go hard with us if they should catch us spying on them."

"You don't suppose they'd kill us, do you?" asked Ned, a little apprehensively.

"I don't know. It looks to me as if a man who would burn a barn to revenge himself for the killing of a worthless and vicious dog, wouldn't hesitate to take human life, if he were driven into close quarters."

"I think so, too. It seemed strange to me that Pete should burn your grandfather's barn for what you did. That was taking revenge on your grandfather, not on you."

"Yes, that's so; but men of his stamp never stop to reason. What we have seen tonight has shown us pretty conclusively that Pete Atkins is capable of nothing in that line. Simon Dart has furnished the brains, and done the thinking for him. If he hadn't old Pete would have been in limbo years ago."

"I guess that's true enough."

"When the old rascal burned our barn he thought he would

hit both grandfather and myself. He knew that I owned part of the live stock."

"But why should he want to injure your grandfather?"

"He has always had a grudge against him. Grandfather, you know, is pretty outspoken in his temperance views, and has never hesitated to speak his mind pretty freely about the evil old Pete is doing in this town. Probably Pete was only too glad of a chance to do him an injury while he was squaring up his grudge against me."

"It won't do for us to take any chances with fellows like him if we go to Letter K."

"Not at all. We must act cautiously and go prepared to defend ourselves in case of necessity."

There were two very happy boys who fell asleep in Raymond's den at broad daylight that morning, to dream on well formulated plans which were to close the criminal career of old Pete Atkins.

CHAPTER XV.

RAYMOND IS MADE A PRISONER.

"Well, boys, I suppose you will bring back Ezra Johnston's catamount when you return," said grandfather Benson smilingly, as he watched Raymond and Ned drive out of the yard for a "hunting trip" to Letter K, Byer Ames accompanying them to bring back the team.

"Perhaps we'll find larger game," responded Raymond.

"Oh, yes, I forgot your skill as a bear killer," said Mr. Benson with a merry twinkle in his eye. "Be sure you trap your game before you shoot it, though."

"We'll attend to that," was Raymond's laughing response; but Ned knew that his words had a deeper significance than grandfather Benson suspected.

"Perhaps he'll see more meaning to your words later on," he said.

"I hope so."

"It won't be our fault if he doesn't."

"What mischief are you two plotting," asked Byer uneasily.

"We are after the Letter K devil."

"Well, you'll have to go down to the Atkins place for that.
Old Ezra Johnston found it there."

"You really think the old fellow was drunk when he made that discovery do you?" asked Raymond, availing himself of the opportunity to change the drift of the conversa-

"Of course he was."

"Well, that's the way it always seemed to me."

"You needn't be afraid that we shall follow his example," added Ned jokingly.

"See here boys, you are trying to keep something back from me," said Byer with a searching glance at their faces. "You have some scheme afoot that you don't want anyone to know about. I think I can surmise what it is, without much trouble."

"I think very likely you can, old fellow," was Raymond's smiling response; but if you have any suspicions please keep them to yourself."

"Of course I will. You must have found out by this time that you can count on me."

"I certainly have Byer, and I know that if you surmise the purpose of this trip you can be depended upon not to reveal it. I don't want grandfather and grandmother to be worried about us."

"They won't be on my account, but you must be careful boys. Don't do anything rash!"

"We'll look out for that," said Raymond, confidently.

"Yes, we shan't take any foolish chances," added Ned.

Their ride was soon over, and, having charged Byer to return for them in three days, they started in the best of spirits down the "tote" road that led to Amos Dole's old lumber camp. They paused a moment at the spot where Cobe Hersom's bear had so nearly made an end of big, good natured Joel Webber, and would very likely have succeeded

in doing so had not Raymond stopped it by a lucky shot just in the nick of time.

"I tell you, it was pretty exciting about the time he knocked Joel into those bushes," said Ned. "I never expected to see him come out himself again. I thought sure he was done for."

Raymond broke into a hearty laugh. "I never can hold in when I think of the way Joel looked," he said. "I believe I should have laughed just the same if it had killed him. He looked so comical."

"He took it good naturedly enough," said Ned, "but I'll bet he'd have given fifty dollars about the time he crawled out if he hadn't been so free in bantering us."

"I guess he'd have given more than that."

"Perhaps he would."

"The more I see of that thing," said Raymond, "the more I am convinced that it doesn't pay to have sport at the expense of others. Sooner or later they are sure to get the laugh back on you with interest; besides, it's rather mean business, anyway."

"I guess that's about so," assented Ned.

The boys found the road, which was an excellent one in winter, when it was covered with deep snows and constantly traversed by heavy teams going to and from the camp, an exceedingly difficult one for fall travel. Stumps and muck holes were numerous, and there were stretches of corduroy whose roughly laid logs, broken and upheaved by the frosts, made progress extremely tedious.

"Well, I'm about willing to turn back," said Ned in disgust. "I begin to believe that we have taken the wrong view of old Pete, after all."

"Why so?"

"If he lugs things out of here, 'pon my soul I believe that he fully earns them by the sweat of his brow."

"Most likely he does," answered Raymond. "Men of his stamp will work a good deal harder to be knaves than they would have to if they were honest citizens."

"That's so," assented Ned. "It's cost Simon Dart more a good many times to cheat folks out of things than it would to have paid for them."

"No doubt of it; but he wouldn't feel at home with anything that came into his possession honestly."

"Of course he wouldn't. He's never so happy as when planning some knavery."

"That's so, he's always figuring to get what he hasn't earned; but we'll bring him to the end of his rope before long."

"We'll try hard enough."

By the time the boys had made eight miles they were pretty well wearied, and the haversacks in which they carried their provisions seemed loaded with lead. Even their double barrelled shot guns appeared to have assumed the weight of Springfield rifles. They saw by the sun that it was nearly noon, and, withdrawing to a hard wood ridge a little way from the road, soon had a cheerful fire going.

"Do you suppose Pete or his gang will see this smoke?" asked Ned, as they sat before it disposing of a portion of the generous supply of provisions which grandmother Benson had put up for them.

"No, and if they did it wouldn't make much difference. They meet visitors with a bold face. Simon Dart has a permit to cut cedar on this township, and his men are at work at the camp. I've no doubt they will receive us very cordially if we go there."

"Had we better do it?"

"No, I think not, openly. We shall be able to discover more if they don't suspect we are round. I'll tell you what, Ned," he added. "I believe it would be well for us to separate and work up to the camp from different sides. If that 'scoop' Pete spoke of is in the neighborhood of the clearing, we should be a good deal more likely to stumble onto it."

"All right," responded Ned. I'll meet you behind the horse hovel at two o'clock. There's a clump of scrub firs just across the brook. You can hide in those or I will if I get there first. We can time ourselves so as to arrive there nearly together. Two low whistles will make a good signal for us, if we should have occasion to use one. We shall have to be pretty careful how we use them, though."

"All right," said Raymond. "I'll have it in mind."

Ned moved off through the cedars and firs upon one side of the road, and Raymond through those that skirted the other side. "I believe I'll get to the camp a little ahead of Ned," he thought. "It will give me a better chance to reconnoitre there." His reflections were startled by a rabbit, which dashed from the bushes almost under his feet and speedily disappeared in the forest depths. In an instant Raymond's gun was at his shoulder and his finger almost pressed the trigger for a quick shot. He changed his mind, however, and put the weapon back under his arm again. "It would be foolish," he muttered, "to let them know someone is near and put them on their guard."

With the utmost caution he worked his way through the

tangled thickets and about one o'clock in the afternoon found himself in the dense clump of firs behind the horse hovel.

The Dole camp did not differ materially from other Maine lumber camps. It was built of large spruce logs and was capable of furnishing accommodations for a crew of forty men. The bunks were on either side of the camp, the men sleeping with their feet to the big open fire in the center of it, the smoke from which found its way to the outer world through a log chimney. The beds in the bunks consisted of thick wool blankets spread upon fir boughs, the debris from which was kept from the floor by long hewn timbers which ran the whole length of the camp to within about ten feet of the end opposite the door, where both bunks terminated to make room for the long table of cedar splits which extended across this part of the camp. The roof was made of cedar splits carefully lapped over each other. The door, likewise of splits, was fitted with hard wood hinges and had a wooden latch lifted from the outside with a leather string. When this string was pulled inside of the camp, it was effectually locked to all intruders.

The back end of the camp stood on the bank of Bower Brook, and contained the only window the structure boasted, a single sash, with six small panes, securely nailed in its frame. It was used exclusively for light. There was ample ventilation from the broad log chimney on the roof, through which the men were able to look out upon the stars on clear nights while lying in their bunks.

It was certainly not an imposing structure, but those who had lived in it found a fascination attaching to its wild, free life, that only those who have tasted such world-free existence can know or understand.

The horse hovel, a long, low building, divided into a stable and hay loft, by cedar splits laid on rough poles, stood next to the camp and almost adjoining it.

Raymond, from his place of concealment on the opposite side of the brook, could catch the murmur of voices in front of the camp, but could neither see who were speaking nor hear what was said. Unable to endure longer the suspense of waiting, he stole silently and cautiously from his hiding place and climbed down into the bed of the brook, where he found a foot bridge made of large stones, an easy stepping distance apart, which had been placed there in continuation of a foot-path that led between the camp and hovel. Here he paused for a moment to consider what course he had better pursue. He did not dare to go around to the door of the hovel, since it would expose him to the view of the men in front of the camp. He knew very well that if they should discover him, under such circumstances, his reception would be far from pleasant. Pete and his gang, in the face of the reward that had been offered for their apprehension, would be in no mood to trifle. They were desperate fellows, and might very likely resort to desperate expedients if the situation appeared to demand them. Raymond fully appreciated the importance of acting with the greatest caution. After a moment's reflection, he carefully put his gun and haversack through one of the small windows behind the horse stalls and slowly and quietly worked his way after it.

Once within the hovel, he experienced an exultant thrill of triumph, and felt that he was well on the way to success in his hazardous undertaking. The loft was reached by a short ladder. This Raymond pulled up behind him, after gaining that place of concealment. "With my shot gun and revolver I could hold this loft against a small army," he thought, as he gazed around on its dingy walls.

It was a cheerless place. Through great cracks in the roof splits above he could catch a glimpse of the dull November sky. The wind found its way into the apartment from a number of holes between the logs where the chinking, never very carefully done, had worked entirely out. In one back corner was a small pile of loose hay, which had evidently been left over from the last lumber operation. This Raymond piled carefully up in the front corner towards the camp. Burying himself in it, he applied his eye to a large hole between the logs, and saw a sight that filled him with intense satisfaction. Hard at work, astride the rude bench used for the purpose, was Ike Wallace busily employed with a draw shave in converting cedar splits into shingles. On a short cedar log near him sat old Pete Atkins, holding a Winchester rifle in his hands and evidently in a very dejected frame of mind.

"It's no use, Ike," he said dolefully. "I'm afraid I'll have to pull out. Matters are getting hot for me around here. There's a terrible scrambling after that reward. More than half a dozen fellows shadowed me out of the Corner this morning, but I threw them off the track by striking into the Bell woods. They found pretty quick that they couldn't keep me in sight. There are few men who can follow me in the timber, if I do say it," he added with an accent of pride.

"I don't see what you need be scared at," said Wallace, looking up from his work with an air of disgust. "Nobody can ever find the scoop, and as long as you lay low and make no trips across the line I don't see how they can trap you. You certainly are not obliged to lay yourself liable till matters

get quieted down a little. It isn't any crime for you to stay here and hunt, is it? If the officers or bounty hunters come to visit us, all is we'll take them right into the camp and use them just as handsomely as we know how. I tell you, Pete, there's nothing in the world like a good dinner to kill a man's suspicions against you. I took the stings all out of those Corner fellows. It's lucky for us, though, that their noses weren't any longer."

"You're a good one on those matters, Ike," said Pete approvingly. "I'll trust you to look after them, any time. I can't say, though, that I like that young Frenchman of yours."

"Why not?"

"He's terribly rattle headed and hasn't any judgment whatever. I feel nervous to have him round with me. I don't know what to expect from him. I have never found a man for this business equal to Jean Gambier. He knew how to do his work well and keep his mouth shut."

"That's so; he was a good one."

"Curse that meddlesome boy! If it hadn't been for him, Jean would be with me now."

"That's so, but I don't see how the boy is to blame. Seems 's if I'd drop anybody that I caught burning my barn, if I had a shooting iron in my hands. You made a bad break there, Pete. You oughter listened to my advice."

"Perhaps so, but if you'd had a boy shoot the best dog in Chestnut, and then threaten to draw a bead on you with a gun, I don't think you'd have felt very pleasant about it, Ike. 'Pon my soul, if I'd struck the young cub I haven't a doubt but what he'd peppered me."

"Not much doubt of that, I guess," responded Ike.

"Well, the young bantam has succeeded in making things mighty nasty for me, but I'll cut his spurs off before I'm done with him, or my name isn't Pete Atkins. What bothers me most is the loss of Gambier. I had come to depend on him so much that I hardly know how to get along without him. He was a man that knew something. He always had a scheme for every emergency. Why, it was his plan that run out George Fields and Bill Stetson when they came here a few years ago on a trapping expedition," and Pete's features expanded into a broad grin at the recollection.

"I knew they got scared out of here, but I thought they really did hear some varmint—a loupcervier, or something of that sort."

"I guess most people thought so, didn't they?"

"Yes, that was the general idea."

"Well, they didn't hear anything of the sort. Jean and I worked that little racket. You see, Amos Dole began his lumbering operations on the East Branch that fall, and Jean and I, knowing he probably wouldn't use this camp again for some years, took hold and fitted it up for business. We had just got the scoop done and well filled with collateral when those fellows got along. I tell you, I felt sick; but Jean, he sized them up and suggested an Injun devil scare. I didn't have much confidence in its success, but thought it wouldn't do any harm to try it. About twelve o'clock we opened on the boys. I never had such a circus in my life. Jean got behind that large birch beyond the brook, and I took to the shade of that big elm on the further side of the clearing. You see, we didn't want to take any chances in case they should shoot. But we needn't have given ourselves any uneasiness on that score. They didn't have spirit enough, after we started in on them, to pull a trigger. I never saw the nerve so completely knocked out of two fellows in my life. Jean would fetch a screech from his side of the clearing, and a minute later I would answer it from my side. We had made up our minds to give them a night of it, so we whooped it up till nigh five o'clock in the morning. As soon as it was daylight those fellows lost no time in vamosing the ranch, and nobody bothered us again all winter."

"Well, that was pretty neat, I declare," laughed Ike. "Do you know, Pete, I believe that boldness is the very best concealment for this sort of business?"

"I guess you are right there. It was all that saved me and Jean once. We had just come over the line with three packs for the scoop and had thrown them down on one of the bunks, thinking we wouldn't stow them away till after supper. While we were building a fire who should come to the camp but Rufe Brown's boy and a cousin of his—a Portland fellow, I believe."

"Well, I swan," was Ike's interested reply. "What did you do?"

"Why, we treated them just as perlite's if they'd been nabobs. We invited them right into camp and insisted they should have some supper with us. After that was eaten Jean and I went out in the horse hovel to have a smoke and talk over matters a little. We agreed it would be easy enough to get rid of them. They evidently felt that we had the first claim to the camp and would not think of staying in it without an invite from us. We concluded, though, that if they were going to remain in the neighborhood for two or three days, as their packs indicated, we'd better insist upon their staying right there. We'd know where they were, then,

and could watch them, but if they should go and build a camp of their own, they'd be twice as apt to stumble on us when we shouldn't want to see them."

"That was a sensible way of looking at it," said Ike approvingly,

"Jean wanted to try the Injun devil scare on them, but I knew it wouldn't work. No boy could be the son of Rufe Brown and not have pluck, and the cousin looked as if he had considerable backbone, too. I saw at once they were two very different fellows from George Fields and Bill Stetson. The idea of an Injun devil would make them stay longer. We invited them to make the camp their head-quarters while they stayed in the neighborhood and not mind us at all; we said that we should be gone a good deal, hunting and visiting some traps which we gave them to understand we had set."

"So they stayed with you, did they?"

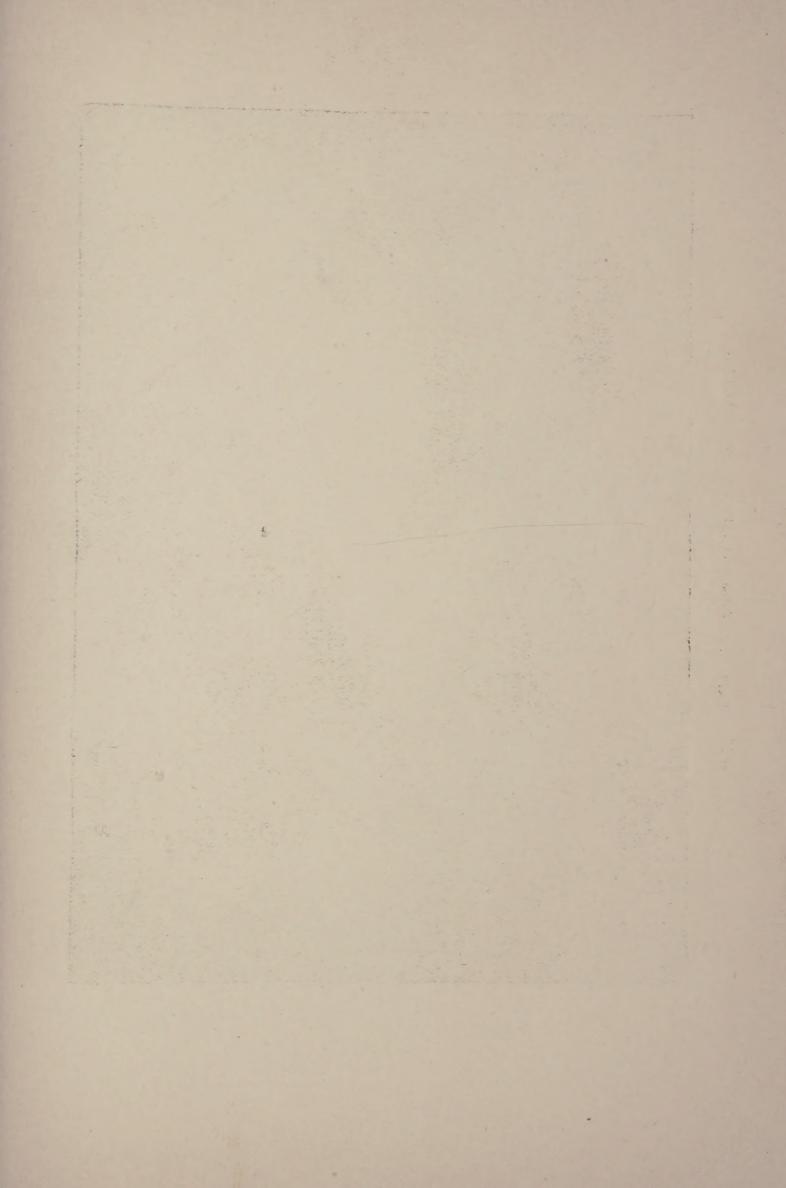
"Yes, that night. About three o'clock in the morning, when they were fast asleep, Jean and I lugged the packs into the hovel and covered them up with hay. Then we cleared out across the line. When we came back the next night the boys were gone. I don't believe, though, they suspected anything. I wish I could say as much for that deputy collector who was in the Court House when young Brown gave his testimony at the arson trial."

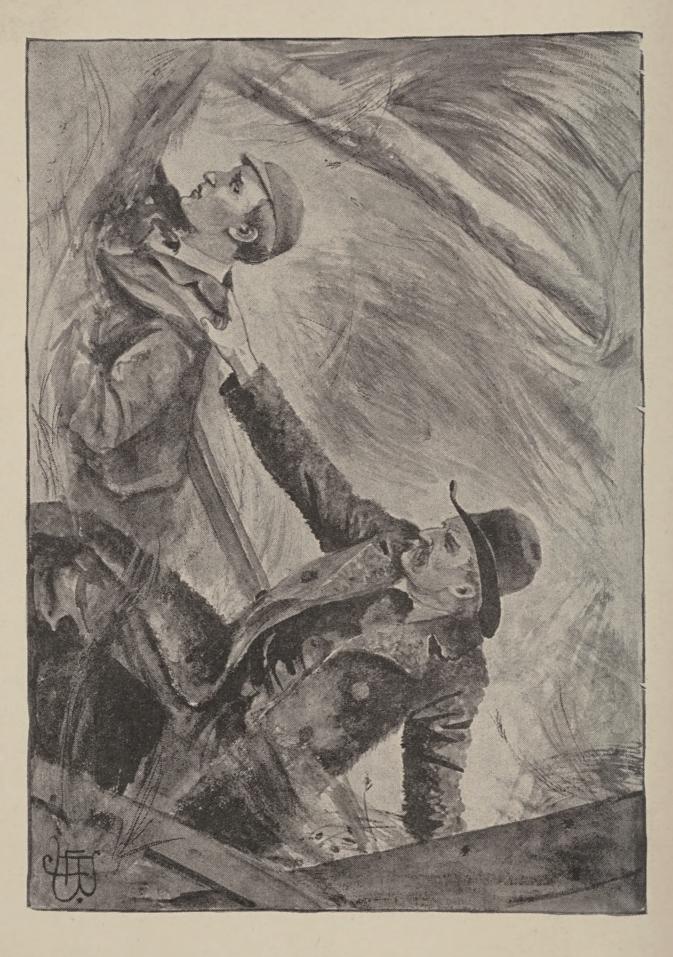
"He saw through the hole in the grindstone, did he?"

"Well, I should rather guess he did, from the look that came over his face. I sat right where I could get the full benefit of it, too."

"Perhaps he will be down here to look things over."

"Most likely he will."





"PETE SEIZED HIM BY THE COLLAR" (Page 237)

At this interesting stage of the conversation between Pete and Ike a startling mishap befell Raymond, who, as we may well believe, had been a very interested listener. In his working about to get a better view of the speakers, the cross pole which supported that portion of the loft floor slipped from its bearings, precipitating Raymond with considerable force, and no little racket, into the horse stall below, and nearly burying him beneath a pile of hay and chaff. Before he could scramble to his feet old Pete, with an exclamation of astonishment and rage, had bounded into the hovel and seized him by the collar with a grip that indicated a determination not to lose him.

"Thought you'd play the spy on me, you young scoundrel, did you?" he hissed through his clenched teeth, with a face fairly livid with passion. "Very well, sir, it won't be my fault if you don't have all the fun out of this you planned on." With these words the brawny smuggler jerked Raymond through the door of the hovel and dragged him in front of the camp, to Ike's unbounded amazement.

"What does this mean?" he gasped.

"This young cub has been sneaking round the hovel and playing the spy, that's all," answered Pete. He wants excitement and adventure, and it won't be our fault if he doesn't get all he wants of both."

"How did you come there?" inquired Ike, with evident uneasiness, and it was plain to see that Raymond's unexpected appearance had disturbed him not a little.

"I was looking the camp over a little. I thought -- "

"You were playing the sneak, you young cur—that's what you were doing," interposed Pete, savagely. It's no use trying to palaver round us. How many are with you?"

"I'll leave that for you to find out. You'll be apt to hear from them in due season," said Raymond, defiantly."

"Well, they'll have to hunt considerably before they find you. There's a lot of starch left in you yet, my young bantam, but we'll take that out of you in a very short time. Your bringing up's been neglected. I 'spose you came down here on purpose to cultivate my acquaintance, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll give you all the chance you want. There's nothing small or mean about me. I'll do my best to entertain you in a lively sort of way. Oh! this will be high fun for you," and Pete indulged in a grim laugh, that showed Raymond that he could look for little mercy at the hands of his captor.

"Fetch me some of that rope," continued the smuggler chief, tightening his grip upon Raymond till the boy had all he could do to withhold a cry of pain.

In response to his order Ike hurried into the camp and returned with a roll of the small rope used in bunching shingles. With this Raymond was speedily bound hand and foot. Old Pete never for a moment released his hold upon his collar while Ike was doing this, and Raymond felt like a pigmy in his powerful grasp.

"Now just run through his pockets and see what you find," commanded Pete, when Ike had tied the last knot. Raymond's pockets were quickly rifled, and a seven shooter revolver and a clasp knife brought to light.

"You carry quite an arsenal, I see," sneered Pete. "Oh, you're a big Injun, you are. What did you expect to do with those things?"

"Defend myself, if I'd had a chance to use them," said Raymond coolly, determined to put on a bold front.

"Oh, you did. Well, we'll take care of them for you," said Pete. "Perhaps they'll be used, just the same, though," he added significantly.

Raymond made no reply, wisely concluding that it would not be best, under the circumstances, to irritate his captor further.

"See here, Ike," continued Pete, "just take that clasp knife and cut me a stout birch withe."

"Hold on, Pete," said Ike in alarm. "What do you intend to do?"

"I'm going to take a little of the dust out of this young cub's jacket."

"No you won't," was the decided rejoinder.

"Why not?"

"Because I won't be a party to anything of the sort."

"He isn't as anxious as you are to pass the rest of his days at Thomaston," said Raymond.

He saw in Ike's refusal to resort to unnecessary violence the key to his own safety, and determined to strengthen the old man in that position by working upon his fear of the law.

"Don't open that jaw of yours again," said Pete with a rough shake, divining his purpose. "If you do, I'll put a stopper on it that you won't like." He spoke too late, however. Old Ike Wallace had a profound respect for the strong arm of the law. He had, morever, no feeling against Raymond, and did not purpose to be a party to his violent usage. He flatly refused to carry out Pete's order, and with a savage oath and evident reluctance the latter was compelled to relinquish his purpose.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TABLES TURNED.

"I wish Jean Gambier was here," exclaimed Pete in very evident sincerity. "He is worth a dozen such knock-kneed chicken-hearted fellows as you."

It was evident that the Chestnut rumseller felt very much disgusted with the refusal of Ike Wallace to assist in giving Raymond a flogging.

"Very likely he is, in this kind of business," was Ike's response, "and he's got to the place where such fellows usually bring up. If you take me for a man of his make, you're very much mistaken, that's all. What are you goin' to do with that boy?"

"I haven't decided yet. One thing is certain, though. I shan't let him go."

"Well, perhaps you'd better keep him out here in front of the camp," said Ike, sharply. "Somebody's liable to drop in on us at most any time, and it would be a highly interestin' sight for them."

"You're right, Ike. We can't keep him here. Go in and open up the scoop."

"Well, I guess I'm going to learn more about Pete's dugout than I ever mapped out to," was Raymond's reflection, as his captor dragged him into the camp. Here he was held

a moment while Ike Wallace revealed the mystery of Pete's hiding place. The boughs on one of the bunks were scraped away and the plank flooring beneath exposed to view. This was, to all appearances, securely nailed to the heavy sleepers beneath with large spikes. In this case, however, appearances were deceitful. Inserting an iron bar under the edge of this flooring, Ike quickly threw it upon its side, showing that it was held together on the under side by heavy cross cleats securely screwed on. Beneath this flooring was revealed a cellar, or rather hole, about ten feet square, and nowhere within four feet of the outer edge of the camp, around which ran a heavy embankment of earth. It would have been difficult to conceive of a better hiding place. It was about six feet deep and was reached by a short ladder. Down this Ike led the way with a lighted lantern, and Pete followed with Raymond.

The interior of the scoop was not at all inviting. It was dark and clammy, and Raymond shuddered in spite of himself at the thought of being confined in its dismal gloom. Its sides were studded with heavy cedar logs placed on end, and set closely together to prevent the earth from caving in. The floor was of a similar character.

"Well, take a good look at it," said Pete, roughly. "It will probably be your home for some time to come."

"Perhaps it may, and then again it may not," responded Raymond, defiantly, but at the same time his heart sank within him, and he would have given all he possessed at that moment to have been safely back under grandfather Benson's roof.

There was nothing in the scoop save a few empty boxes and casks. It was evident that Pete had decided to call a

halt in his business until the storm that had gathered at the arson trial should blow over.

"Here, lay him on this," said Ike, spreading upon the floor one of the heavy woolen blankets which he carried under his arm.

"One of those is enough," growled Pete.

"I don't think so," was the decided rejoinder, as Ike spread the second blanket over Raymond where Pete had lain him as if he had been a log. Never before in his life had Raymond experienced such a desolate feeling of utter helplessness. Pete and Ike ascended the ladder. He heard the heavy flooring replaced. The faint light that streamed into the scoop from the camp was shut off. He was startled by the overwhelming sense that he was alone and a helpless prisoner in an underground apartment where even his shouts would fail to reach the outside world; or should they do so, would fail to meet with any response. "I got out of it better than I expected when I first felt Pete's grip on me," he reflected. "I was afraid that he would shoot me on the spot. I believe he would, too, if old Ike hadn't been with him. Well, I shall have to make the best of it, but if there's any way of getting out of this place I'm going to discover it."

He strained with all his strength upon his bonds, but it was of no use. Old Ike had done his work well, and the hard knots refused to give. Raymond lay very quietly for a few minutes trying to conjure up some way out of his difficulty. There was something terribly oppressive in the scoop. Its atmosphere was heavy with mouldy odors. The light and sounds of the outside world were completely shut off. "It's a regular tomb," he muttered, as his eyes sought in vain to penetrate its darkness. "And what," he thought with a shudder, "if old Pete should make it mine."

At this moment a sharp gnawing upon one of the empty boxes broke the stillness of the place, and brought a new terror to Raymond.

"Can it be possible that this place is infested with rats!" he thought, with a feeling of horror, recalling some of the frightful tales he had read concerning the ferocity of these rodents in attacking even human life when in large numbers, and under the pressure of hunger. He raised his voice and shouted aloud. Immediately the gnawing ceased and the scamper of small feet told how groundless were his fears. The intruder had been a mouse. "I guess there are no rats here," muttered Raymond, with a sigh of intense relief, feeling his courage return again. "I wonder what this stuff I am tied with is," he thought, as he gave his arms a pull to determine the tightness of the knots.

Raymond's hands were crossed and bound behind his back. He found that by rolling one wrist a little he could reach with his fingers the rope that held them together. A thrill of exultation ran through him when he found that it was a loose twisted hemp. He gave a sharp pull upon one of the strands, and to his great joy succeeded in breaking it. Raymond was jubilant. His spirits, which had been at a low ebb, rose again at this outlook for escape. With feverish haste he began to break the small strands. But he soon found that the task was one that called for great patience. He had never realized before how many threads there were even in a small shingle rope. It seemed to him that he was ing no headway at all. Each little strand resisted him tenaciously, as if determined to do its part in keeping him in captivity. His fingers grew stiff and tired, and he was forced to give up his work and rest them.

At length, however. he learned patience, and found that by going slowly he was able to keep steadily at his task. Before long he felt, with a thrill of hope, that he was making headway. The rope grew gradually smaller, until at length by a violent effort he burst its remaining strands. It took him but a moment to untie the cords that bound his legs. So far as his limbs were concerned he was free, but notwithstanding this, he was still a prisoner. To be sure, he could probably go up the ladder and lift the flooring with his shoulders, but he felt that this would not be a wise move. He would be almost certain to run across Pete or Ike, and knew very well that if they had occasion to bind him a second time he would not be able to free himself.

While he was reflecting what course to pursue, he heard the iron bar inserted under the flooring above. It opened and closed again, and a moment later Raymond saw Tom Atkins descending the ladder. A lantern swung from his arm, and in one hand he carried a tin plate with a few pieces of hard tack, and in the other a tin can filled with water. Raymond lost no time in pulling the blanket over him, and reassuming the position in which Pete had left him.

"Well, you're a pretty duck," exclaimed Tom, as he held his lantern above his head and gazed down upon Raymond with a malignant leer.

"Very likely I am, at present—by comparison," was Raymond's cool rejoinder.

"See here, my hearty, it will pay you to keep a civil tongue in your head," said Tom angrily. "We hold all the trumps just now, so far as you are concerned."

"Perhaps you do, said Raymond, defiantly, but my hand isn't all played yet."

"No, and it won't be likely to be. I tell you, dad is the wrong man to buck against. You'll wish you had never seen him before you get out of this scrape."

"It may be the other way."

"Oh, yes, it's well enough for you to talk big," said Tom with a sneering laugh. "It will help keep your courage up. Old Ike Wallace thought I was terribly willing to bring this grub for you. I was, but it was because I had an old score to settle with you. I haven't forgotten the mean trick you played on me when you got Joel Webber to drop me from the counter in Copeland's store. You thought you were doing something awful smart."

"That was your own fault," said Raymond. "If you hadn't played the sneak, it would never have happened."

"Was I obliged to make a victim of myself just to give you a chance to laugh, I'd like to know?" demanded Tom, indignantly.

"No, but you wasn't obliged, either, to make a Paul Pry of yourself, and give away the boys' fun to the men in the store."

"I wouldn't talk about Paul Prys if I had been caught eavesdropping, as you were. Now you think, perhaps, that you are going to get these hard tack and this water, but you are not. It will be some time before you get anything to eat, if I have my way. I intend to even up matters a little between you and me. I'll place this grub on the box here. No doubt you'll find the smell of it very refreshing," and Tom laughed heartily at his own sense of humor. "But there's one little thing that remains to be done before I leave you," he said, as he placed the lantern upon the keg, and produced a stout switch from under his coat.

"What do you intend to do with that?" demanded Ray-mond sharply.

"I intend to do the job father was going to do."

"You wouldn't be a coward enough to strike a fellow when he's as defenseless as I am, would you?"

"There isn't any question of bravery with me in this affair," said Tom. "All is, I owe you a good thrashing and I'm going to give it to you."

"Don't you dare to strike me with that switch," said Raymond.

"But I will dare," was the defiant answer, as Tom stooped to pull the blanket from him.

"Help! Murder! Help!" he shouted a moment later, in genuine surprise and terror. A most unexpected thing had happened. As he pulled the blanket away, Raymond seemed to rise with it, and grasping Tom firmly by the hair of the head, threw him forward upon his face with a force that almost knocked the breath out of him, Then, jumping astride of him, he fastened a grip upon his throat that effectually shut off his cries for help.

"You don't intend to choke me to death, do you?" gasped Tom, in genuine terror. Like most boys of his peculiar class, he was an abject coward, and now that he found himself in a tight place he was thoroughly frightened.

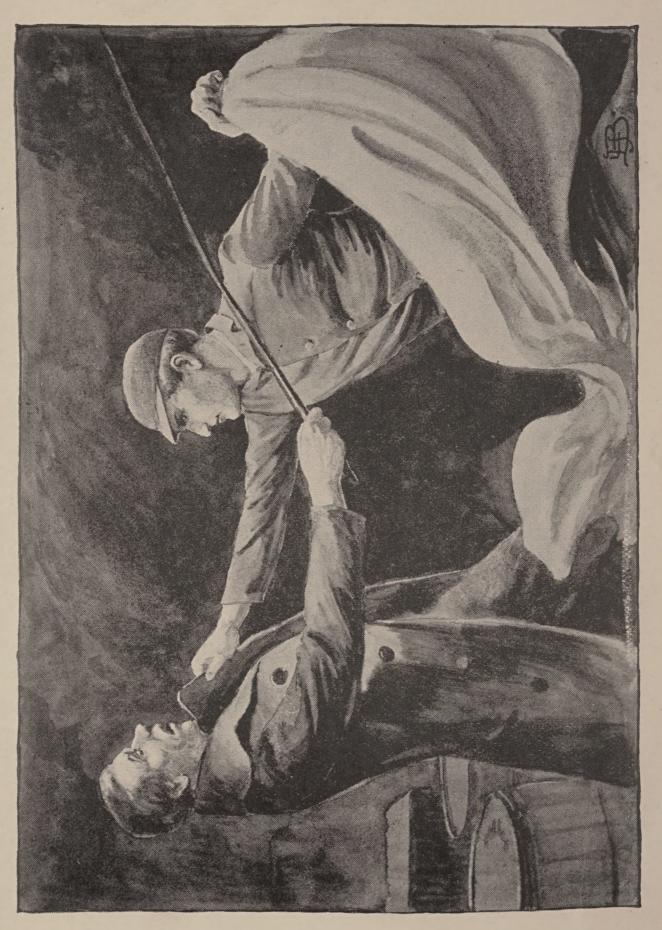
"I don't know," said Raymond, in answer to his question.

"That depends. If you do as I say, I'll let you off easy, but if you don't—" and he tightened his grip upon Tom's throat in a very significant manner.

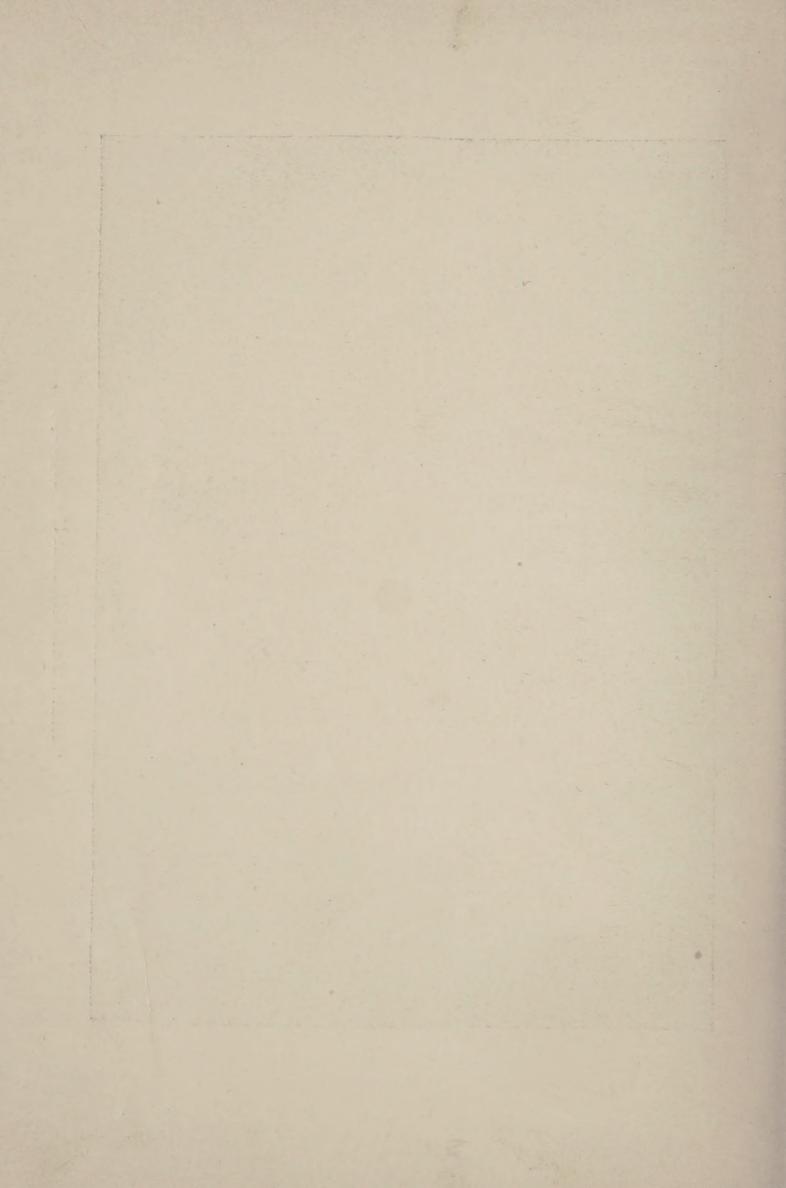
"I'll do just what you say," whimpered the rumseller's son.

"Very well, then, climb out of that overcoat."

The order was tremblingly obeyed.



"HELP! MURDER! HELP!" (Page 246)



"Now throw off that hat."

The broad brimmed soft felt hat which Tom wore was thrown upon the coat, the thoroughly terrified fellow appearing only too glad to escape punishment at such a price.

"Now lie face down on that blanket," commanded Ray-

mond.

"You don't mean to tie me, do you?" gasped Tom in amazement, as the bold plan of escape which Raymond had in mind flashed across him.

"That's about the size of it," answered Raymond, coolly.

Tom made no response to this, and Raymond quickly bound him hand and foot.

"Now I have just one thing to say to you," he announced, as he pulled Tom's soft felt hat close over his ears, and drew on his long gray ulster, "and it would be well for you to bear it in mind. A great change has occurred recently. You have become Raymond Benson and I am Tom Atkins. Its a very remarkable transformation, and, of course, makes me feel meaner than mud. It may be hard for you to grasp this fact, but it's so, just the same. Now you had better keep quiet. Father Atkins is considerably soured on you. He's a mean, sneaking, cowardly, vindictive sort of a lowbred scoundrel, and it would be just like him, if he heard you bellowing round down here to lift up that flooring and give you a shot from his Winchester. Besides, I haven't forgotten the bounce I got from Squire Copeland's counter, and might take it into my head to come down here and give you a good thrashing myself. I probably shan't visit you for a few days, but if you should grow hungry in the meantime, you will, no doubt, find the smell of that hard tack over there very refreshing. Ta, ta, Raymond, see you later."

With these words, to which Tom listened with a sickly grin, Raymond took the lantern on his arm and ascended the ladder. He applied his shoulder to the flooring and found that he could raise it much more easily than he had anticipated. A moment later he found himself alone in the camp. The sunlight dazzled him. It seemed to him that he had spent a very long time in the scoop, and he was surprised, on looking at his watch, to find that it was only three o'clock.

On one of the bunks he found his cartridge belt just where old Pete had thrown it, but was unable to discover any trace of his revolver or knife. He glanced at the camp window as he buckled on the belt with a half determination to make his escape through it. But this idea was speedily abandoned. The window was a single sash, securely nailed to its frame. The noise occasioned by any attempt to remove it would be almost certain to result in discovery. Raymond decided that his best course would be to depend on the disguise he had secured from Tom to conceal his identity. He accordingly put on a bold front and walked from the camp imitating, as closely as possible, Tom's pecular loping gait.

To his intense relief, he found Ike Wallace the only person in the vicinity of the camp. The old man was busily engaged in shaving shingles and merely gave him a glance over his shoulder, never once doubting that it was Tom. With eager steps Raymond hastened to the horse hovel and, climbing to the loft, was overjoyed to find his double barrelled shot gun just where he had left it. With this in his hand he felt all his courage and confidence return. "If old Pete and I come together again," he thought, "there'll not be so much difference between us as there was before,"

As Raymond was about to steal out of the door and around

the end of the hovel to the path that led across the brook, he was arrested by the sound of voices. Carefully digging out some of the chinking in the front of the horse stall, he saw Ike Wallace engaged in conversation with a young man about twenty-five years of age, a dark-skinned fellow whom Raymond remembered to have seen about the Corner on several occasions. "That's the young Frenchman whom the Corner boys saw helping old Ike with the shingles," he thought. "I wonder what he's up to."

It was evident that Ike was glad to see the young man, for he greeted him most heartily. "How d'ye do, Paul, he said cordially. I'd begun to fear the Custom House officers had you."

"Oh, no. Not yet. They no can run so fast as me," was the laughing rejoinder.

"Well, speed is a good thing in the business nowadays. The good old times when the smugglers and Custom House deputies hobnobbed and drank punch together have gone. I remember Lafe Hamm, who used to drive team for Steve Larkin when the old fellow ran the Bell House at Bolton. There was a good deal of liquor sold there in them days. It was a time when everybody smiled occasionally, and some of them a good deal oftener. There were barrels of liquids sold over old man Larkin's bar. Nearly all on it came from across the line, and mighty little on it ever paid tribute to Uncle Sam. One starry winter night—so light you could almost see to read,—Lafe was comin' home from across the line with a double horse sled loaded with barrels of rum. Jest before he got to the travern he happened to look over his shoulder, and who should he spy sittin' on the back part o' the load but the collector o' customs himself. The old fellow had been waitin' in the doorway of his office when Lafe passed and got on behind without bein' noticed Lafe never let on that he had seen him, but drove straight on to the Bell House. He pulled up under the old man's window and yelled out at the top of his voice, "Here you are, Steve. Here's your rum, Custom House officer and all!"

"By sakes! I guess it surprised heem, hey?"

"Well, I should rather say it did. He never let on, though. He dressed as coolly as he ever did, but you may bet he kept up a considerable of a thinkin'. When he got down into the yard, he greeted the Custom House officer jest as bland as a herrin'. 'Why, good evening, Mr. Bennett, how d'ye do,' ses he. 'Glad to see you. Drive that rum into the barn, Lafe. We was a little late with this load, but I was goin' to bring in the schedule of it fust thing in the mornin'. Come into the house and get warm."

"He go, hey?"

"Yes, and got pretty well filled up before he left, I guess. The next day Steve paid the duty on the rum and nothin" was said about it."

"Oh! there used to be some mighty lively chaps at work totin' things across the line, unbeknown to the officers in them times, now I can tell you. They had men o' brains to steer such matters then—a mighty sight different from some on 'em that lead off nowadays," added Ike in a lower tone, casting a cautious glance about the clearing. "There wasn't nigh so much risk in them days. Roads were not so numerous or so good as they be now; people were fewer, and the officers couldn't watch things so sharply. I wish you could have seen the crowd that used to make their headquarters at the Bell tavern in the old days. Smugglin' flourished then.

You see that was before our pesky liquor laws were made, and it was pretty hard to tell jest whether any particular lot o' rum was sneaked across the line or not. Everybody that did any tradin' sold it then. Bless you, how times have changed! Why, in them days, a man could be jest as respectable sellin' rum as sellin' groceries. Nothing was thought on it—and, as a fact, the both on 'em were usually sold together. A man would have been in hard sleddin' then if he'd tried to run a grocery store without a good supply o' New England rum. There was lots o' money in that part o' the business. Why, bless you, there's lots o' folks I know on today stickin' their noses in the air and playin' the nabob, whose daddies, to my knowledge, made their money sellin' rum in old times. I tell you, Paul, it doesn't take a very heavy foundation for a codfish aristocracy. It mostly consists in elevation o' nose. Why, dear boy, if I'd a hung on to my money in the old days, and laid it up to interest, I might today be cuttin' quite a wide swath with some o' the loftiest on 'em. Generosity was my great failin', but it was enough to shut me clean out o' that crowd—and here I am. But, after all, the old days were the live ones, and I like to call 'em up now and then."

"Them been high times, hey?"

"Well, you may jest believe they were. Talk about intemp'rance, bless you we don't know the real deep down meanin' o' that word in these days o' prohibition. I wish you could have jest seen the blow-outs there used to be in the Bell tavern. Most everybody that was present took a hand in them, and the amount o' rum that would slide over the bar on them occasions was something tremendous."

"The officers, where they been?"

"Usually they were the first ones to get filled up, and laid away. They had a different way o' puttin' down rum in them days. Talk about there bein' as much rum drank today as there ever was. It's all bosh. There doesn't begin to be as much. People are growin' more and more temperate. There doesn't begin to be the rum smuggled across the line that there used to be when I first started into the business with old Steve Larkin thirty year ago this very fall."

"What sort crowd you have?"

"As jolly a one as ever got together. You see there wasn't much danger in the work then, and the boys didn't have nothin' to worry them. They were up to all sorts o' capers. Bell Akers was the biggest joker in the crew. He's out West somewhere now, I believe. I can see him in my mind, jest as he used to look when he first joined us—a lank, loose-jointed fellow, always grinnin', and always hatchin' some mischief or other. Bill would always take things goodnaturedly when he got rubbed—as he sometimes did; but he never failed to pay back his debts with interest. He knew more than he 'peared to, as some of the boys found out to their sorrow."

"He feex 'em, hey?"

"Well, he jest did. The first night he struck camp the boys sort o' sized him up for a mutton head. No sooner had he got soundly to sleep than Dan Ellis, one of the biggest jokers in the camp, took a sharp knife and cut out every button hole on his clothes. How the boys nagged him the next mornin'; but they couldn't get him mad. I shall never forget the quiet grin there was on his mug as he sat astride the deacon seat the that mornin' sewin' up the edges o' them button holes. He never said a word about it, but you better

believe he kept up a powerful sight o' thinkin'. About a week after that Dan Ellis was smokin' his pipe before the fire one night, when, all to once, it sailed away through the log chimney in the roof, and was never seen afterwards. That was the beginnin' of some of the comicalist and most pestiferous tricks I ever heard tell on. All on us came in for attention. At first the cause on 'em was a mystery, but it didn't take us long to find out that Akers was the father o' most o' them. His inventive knack, and his industry was somethin' wonderful. We stood his hilarity jest as long as we could, and then a crowd on us took him out in front o' the camp one day, held him across a large log there, and gave him a sound spankin' with a big salt codfish. He bellowed like a good one, and promised better fashions. We let him go on condition that he shouldn't molest any on us again; but, bless you, that fellow was as chuck full o' mischief as an egg is full o' meat. He couldn't keep out on it, nohow. I will say, howsomever, that he was a little scary about meddlin' with those on us who gave him the trouncin'. When he did do anythin' he was plaguy careful not to be ketched in it."

"De codfeesh been good for heem, I guess."

"Yes, it was jest what he needed."

"I should say dat was been so."

"Well, for all his pranks, Bill was a good fellow, and I should like awful well to see him again; but I 'spose that never will be. Times have changed in this business. There's mighty few on 'em makes a success on it now, in the long run. I've had one or two mighty narrow escapes in the last few years, and I'm gettin' sick on it. I'm thinkin' o' working into somethin' sort o' respectable. We poor dogs are

pretty sure to be the ones that gets pinched in the grippers o' the law. I tell you, Paul, a man that's got money and political influence can do pretty nigh anythin' in this world."

"I don't know, Ike. Mebby so. It not keep Arno Damon from go to prison for smuggling, though, an' he boss more votes what any man does in Mad'wascow. Perhaps was been so, way back, but not now. Pete Atkins, he boss lots votes, but he no save him from tight feex now jus' de same. I no b'lieve de gov'ment officers care very much 'bout dat."

"Well, it's mighty often the case," persisted Ike, doggedly, a little staggered by this practical refutation of his broad indictment of official honesty. "Leastwise, I've known a good many cases on it in my day and generation. Where are you bound for?"

"I been gone to de Corner now. Pete wasn't going to do someting more for a mont'. He been going to wait for some smoother sailing."

"Well, I guess he'll wait a good while, Paul. In my opinion he's finished up his work across the line, and if he don't clear out mighty lively, he'll find himself where the dogs won't bark at him. One thing is certain, he's got to get out of this place right off."

"Whaffor?" asked Paul, with evident uneasiness.

"We've been discovered."

"Deescovered!"

"That's jest the size of it. Pete and I was talkin' over matters a while ago, never suspectin' there was a soul near, when, all to once, Andrew Benson's grandson—the youngster that shot Pete's dog, tumbled through the loft down into the horse stall, He'd bin lis'nin' up there and heard every word we'd said."

"Jeeminy! What Pete he do?"

"He ran in and collered the boy and fetched him out here. I tied him up with shingle rope. Pete was goin' to gin him a lickin', but I 'lowed that wouldn't do, nohow."

"What you do with heem?"

"He's down in the scoop."

"In de scoop! Wal, good-bye Ike. I'm glad you tell me 'bout dees." I been got away pretty quick. I been theenkin' 'bout dees two three days, now I know what I do." Don't theenk dat boy not be found. Eef he not come home when dey 'spect heem, de whole town come down here an' look for heem. Den dey find heem sure. De jig was up, old man. Good bye, tek good care yourself an' not git ketched," and with an apprehensive glance about the clearing the young fellow speedily disappeared up the "tote" road.

After he had gone, Ike buried his chin in his hands and remained for some time in a deep study. It was evident that his reflections were of a perturbed character. Occasionally he would raise his head and glance suspiciously around the clearing as if fearful of being watched. Once he arose and started to enter the camp with some evident purpose in mind, then pausing a moment irresolutely, he resumed his seat and former attitude.

Raymond was in doubt as to what course of action he had best pursue. For a moment he entertained the thought of coming boldly forth and taking the old man prisoner under cover of his shot gun. But upon reflection he abandoned the thought. He would run great risks in securing the wiry fellow, and besides, old Pete was liable to return at any moment.

Having reached this conclusion, Raymond started to climb out of a little window behind the stalls at the rear of the hovel, but immediately drew back in amazement at the sight that met his gaze. Striding savagely up the narrow path that led from the brook was old Pete Atkins, roughly dragging behind him Ned Grover securely bound with shingle rope.

CHAPTER XVII.

NED HAS SOME STIRRING EXPERIENCES.

AFTER separating from Raymond, Ned Grover had struck boldly out into the timber, determined to make as wide a circuit as possible before the time appointed for his meeting with Raymond in the clump of firs back of Dole's camp. He was an adept in woodcraft and succeeded in making rapid progress through the trees and underbrush. "I'll go out till I strike the brook and follow it down to the clearing," he thought. "If old Pete and his crowd have any special hiding place, it won't be far from a water supply." With this reflection he continued rapidly on his way, and soon had the satisfaction of hearing the lively babble of the brook, as it ran briskly over its rocky bed on its long journey to the sea.

"Who'd ever have supposed," mused Ned, as he pushed his way through the bushes and stood for a moment upon a large boulder that jutted out from its bank, "that heavy logs could have been driven on such a small stream; yet I suppose there are thousands and thousands of feet go down here every spring. The system of sluicing has been a big thing for the lumber interests."

The method of timber driving which Ned had in mind is one adopted by lumbermen for getting logs to streams and rivers where the natural depth of the water is sufficient to float them. The timber along such waterways was very early cut off and floated to the mills. Then the lumbermen were forced to go further back into the woods, occasioning longer hauls and a consequent increase of expense in getting the logs to the "landings," as the places where they are piled through the winter, preparatory to driving in the spring, are called. When these hauls became so long as to be unprofitable, the lumbermen were forced to resort to new methods for getting their logs to the large waterways. Then it was that brooks which had always been thought too small for such purposes were utilized as waterways. The rocks and rubbish that impeded their beds were carefully removed. Large log dams were built at convenient intervals along their banks, and through sluiceways in these, the logs were carried in the deep water thus created to the large streams or rivers with sufficient natural depth of water for driving. Vast tracks of timber land, once considered inaccessible to operators, were thus opened up for cutting, and the wealth and prosperity of the state materially increased.

Below the place where Ned had struck the brook was one of these log dams. It was admirably situated between two steep banks of granite on the brow of a small waterfall that marked an abrupt descent of a dozen or more feet in the brook bed. The water ran swiftly through the sluiceway, the gate of which, as is customary with such dams, was always open except during the spring drives. As a result, its artificial lake bed was empty the greater part of the year, but its waters, bounding over the edge of the falls, plunged into a deep natural basin which went by the name of the Pool, and was known to all sportsmen of that section as one of the finest places for trout fishing on the brook.

Ned pushed eagerly on to this place, intending to cut a pole and try the effect of a fly hook upon its speckled beauties. As he approached the edge of the dam, however, he heard the sound of angry voices from below. Crawling carefully to its top, he looked down and saw a sight that filled him with amazement. Standing beneath the slanting logs of the dam, a short distance from the Pool, was Simon Dart, endeavoring in his peculiarly soft spoken and whining way, to pacify the anger of a brawny looking man who walked excitedly up and down, talking and gesticulating in a very loud and emphatic manner.

The face of this man was what riveted Ned's attention. He could have sworn that it was Jean Gambier, though the last he had heard of that worthy was the information, conveyed in a brief paragraph in one of the Bolton papers, that he had arrived safely, in charge of the officers, at the State Prison at Thomaston, and had been assigned work in the carriage department. The man who stood before Dart, however, was his exact counterpart. He had the same swarthy complexion, the same deep, shaggy eyebrows, and snapping small black eyes, and his head was covered with the same profusion of half curly black hair. "Well, I declare," thought Ned. "If that isn't Jean Gambier, it's his ghost. I had a chance to see him during the arson trial, and I can't possibly be deceived in that face." The man's words, however, speedily dispelled this idea. "I tell you," he said fiercely, "there been seventy-five dollar owe Jean, and hees family was going to have eet. There been a wife an' five youngsters, an' dey need de money."

"Now, my good man, don't get excited," said Dart blandly.
"I'm under no pecuniary obligations whatever to your brother.

I never employed him. His services were secured by Atkins. If there was anything due him, Pete is the man to pay it, not I."

"See you, here, dat not go down. Eet no use for you to got behind Pete Atkins when you talk wid me. I been up to snuff in dees beesnis. Jus' kep dat fact in you mind. You de cheef mogul in dees ting. You have done all de head work an' fingered pretty mooch all de moneys. Either you been going to square dees matters oop, or there been big row. Jus' know dat fact. I not be Jewed by you. Eef you not geeve me those money, I been drop on you collar bone like some barrel full bricks."

"Now see here, my good friend, go slow. Let's talk this matter over calmly. I have no disposition to defraud your brother's family out of a single penny that may justly be due them from me. I have no intention of paying any bills, however, that do not properly belong to me. I was on my way to the camp when you met me. Suppose you come along with me and see Pete. We three will talk the matter over together, and settle the thing satisfactorily. I haven't a particle of doubt but what Pete will promptly acknowledge the debt and pay it."

"Look you here, Meester Dart, do I look like some spring cheecken? Eef I do, I not so young's what I seem. Once you got me at de camp an' you an' Pete an' de gang round dar have me in de limbo. I see myself got justeece dar. Bah! Say notings to me. Dem beel been yours to pay. De work was been done for you, an' you been going to square up for eet."

"Don't get so hot, my good man. Even allowing I do owe your brother that amount, which I don't, what authority

would I have to pay it to you? Do you have a written order for it from him?"

"No, but I have de word from hees fam'ly."

"That won't do. How is anybody to know that you would turn it over to them and not keep it yourself? No man has any legal right to pay that money to you without an order in writing from your brother."

"Bah! You was been pretty man to say tings 'bout de law. Much 'tention you been paid to eet all dem years. Dat kind palaver not go down wid me. I was want dat money, an' I was going to have heem now an' here."

"You wouldn't do anything violent, would you?"

"Dat been depend on you. I was going to have dat money, jus' as sure you been born."

With a quick movement Dart's hand sought his breast, but before he could carry out his evident intention of drawing a revolver, he found himself looking into the muzzle of a heavy Colt which his companion had carried in his belt.

"For heaven's sake, don't shoot!" he gasped. "I was just after my pocket book."

"Yes, probably dat been so," was the sarcastic rejoinder.
"Now, Meester Dart, put up you arms an' I takes from you dat shooter an' de wallet, too."

"You wouldn't rob me, would you?" groaned Dart.

"Oh, no. I jus' make sure dat you don't rob my brother's fam'ly. It makes beeg difference you see, Meester Dart, how a ting was been said." With these words Gambier was about to carry out his intentions when both he and Dart were startled by the sounds of a furious struggle, and loud, angry words, which came to them from above the dam.

So absorbed had Ned been in the quarrel between Dart and

his companion that for the time he had forgotten everything else. He was rudely awakened from his interest in the scene below him by a heavy hand upon his collar, and a rough voice exclaiming in his ear:

"What you do here, you young rascal?"

Turning quickly, Ned found himself in the grasp of a man so closely resembling the one with Dart that he almost believed that it was his shadow. "It's a brother, perhaps a twin," was the thought that flashed across his mind. Though captured, Ned was far from being conquered. He was compactly built and wonderfully cordy. With a sharp jerk he attempted to free himself from the strong grasp upon his collar. Failing in this, he suddenly seized his assailant by the hair of the head with both hands and gave him a pull that threw him off his feet. The man still kept his hold on Ned's collar and they rolled together down the sharp incline of the dam to the basin beneath. Fortunately they brought up near the end of the dam, otherwise they might have sustained serious injuries. As it was, they escaped with a few bruises, but both were thoroughly mad. The struggle was promptly and vigorously resumed, but Ned was speedily overcome and carefully tied with a strong cord, which his captor produced from his pocket.

"What do you want of me?" What have I done?" he gasped, as he lay panting from the violence of his struggles.

"I see 'bout dat pretty soon. I been interested in dat crowd below de dam myself. I was jus' go to join dem when I got my eye on you. You was a game one, you was, but eet been no use for you try fight when I got my two duflaps on you" "Oh, I see," responded Ned. "You were coming to bury Dart after your brother had killed him."

"Dat not been so, my boy. I was gone for de camp. I tinks me my brother was there an' p'haps need me. I strik brok to follow eet down an' run onto heem an Dart, just luck. Sam tam had de good luck find you. Our beesnis here not jus' reg'lar, but eet's been all right."

"Well, you might as well smash Dart's head as to break his heart. That's what will certainly happen if you get any money out of him."

"Well, you been a funny one," said Ned's captor, looking at him with evident interest. "What you was here for?"

"Well, I had thought of doing a little fishing."

"That so? Where was you line been?"

"In my haversack."

"What for you keep heem there eef you want feesh?"

"I didn't want to use it till I got ready to."

"You been a queer one. You walk way down de brok, hey, to find some place to feesh, an' no find heem at all."

"I wasn't very anxious to fish," said Ned, "I didn't have much time for it, so thought I would only try a few of the best holes beginning with the big pool below the dam. I heard voices, and thought some one had got in ahead of me, so I climbed up on the dam to see who they were. Just as I was looking down on them you came along and collared me. I should like to know what you mean by it. You've laid yourself liable to the law by laying hands on me in this way. It's an outrage, and is pretty apt to make you a good deal of trouble."

"I takes de chances," said Ned's captor with a quiet grin,

and it was evident that Ned's reference to the law had no terror for him.

"Do you intend to rob me?"

"You see, pretty soon."

"If you do you'll find mighty little to pay for your trouble. I didn't come down here to Letter K to start a national bank."

"I theenk you know more than was been good for you. I keep you a while, but I don't hurt you."

"Who you have there?" shouted the other Gambier, who at this moment made his appearance through the underbrush, closely followed by Dart.

"A youngster what I caught on de top de dam, leesnin' what you two say."

"I know him," said Dart. "He's the son of one of my neighbors."

It was evident that Simon was thoroughly discomfited. His voice was strangely agitated, his mouth twitched nervously, and his sallow complexion had taken on an unnatural whiteness. Ned mentally concluded that Simon had decided that the jig was up and was even then considering plans of escape—a conclusion that was shown by subsequent events to have been correct.

"How much did you say was due your brother?" he asked sullenly.

"Seventy-seex dollar."

Drawing a wallet from his hip pocket, Dart dolefully counted out the amount and handed it to the first brother.

"That was not my debt, but I will pay it," he said. "We are now square, I believe."

"Yes, dat been all," answered the brothers.

"You are quite sure that you don't what me to pension your whole family, are you?"

"We only want what been ours."

"Well, you've got more than that this morning. I don't object to giving something now and then to charity. Your brother's family are evidently in straitened circumstances and I don't object to helping them a little; but I don't want you to try and ride a free horse to death."

These remarks were evidently made for Ned's ears, and sorry as was the boy's plight he could hardly refrain from laughing outright at them.

Even the brothers appeared to see the humor of Simon Dart in the role of a philanthropist. Having secured his money they were impervious to his sarcasm, and grinned broadly at his peppery remarks.

"We been all through for you?" said the elder brother, turning away from him impatiently.

"Well, then, I'll go on to the camp," continued Dart, as he struck out into the woods in the direction of the clearing; but Ned knew very well that it would be some time, if ever, before he would be seen again in that vicinity.

"Well, what do you want of me now, boys?" he said, turning to the Gambiers, when Simon had disappeared in the underbrush. "That money was paid you voluntarily, and I have been a witness of nothing that will count against you. The only way that I see in which you have laid yourselves liable is in your treatment of me, and I shan't say a word about it, if you let me go."

"Hones' eenjun?" asked the elder brother, with evident relief.

[&]quot;Upon my word."

"Wal, then, you can gone," he answered, as he untied the rope that bound him.

"Now let me give you a word of advice, boys," said Ned, when he found himself free. "Go to your homes in Canada with that money and stay there. Don't come this way again. Something is going to drop round here pretty soon."

"Dat's jus' what we been going do," was the response as the brothers disappeared through the woods.

When they had gone, Ned secured his gun and haversack from the place where he had left them when he climbed upon the dam. Then he glanced for the first time at his watch. 'My gracious!" he exclaimed to himself, "I didn't think it was so late. I was to meet Raymond behind the camp at two o'clock, and here it's already half past. It will be after three before I get there, in spite of all I can do." Ned was right in this conclusion. Although he pushed forward with all possible haste, it was over an hour later than the appointed time of meeting when he reached the clump of firs behind the camp. He felt no surprise at not finding Raymond. He had expected that he would get tired of waiting. "I'll bet a dollar he's scouting round that camp somewhere, he thought. "I'll try that whistle on him," and he put his fingers to his mouth and gave the signal that had been agreed upon when he and Raymond separated. It was immediately answered by a brisk step in the underbrush. "I thought that would bring him," muttered Ned. "I wonder what mare's nest he's discovered now."

The step drew nearer. The thick firs parted, and Ned turned to find himself in the rough grasp of old Pete Atkins.

CHAPTER XVIII.

NED BECOMES ACQUAINTED WITH THE "SCOOP."

"Well, this is great luck," chuckled the Chestnut rumseller exultingly as his fingers closed on Ned's collar. "I felt sure that first young cub wasn't alone."

"Hand's off. What do you want of me?" said Ned indignantly."

"I want to see that you're looked after and taken good care of," was the sneering reply, as Pete proceeded to bind Ned in a very secure manner despite his most frantic struggles.

"What did you two boys think you would do round here?" he asked abruptly, when he had finished this task.

"Oh, hunt and fish."

"You wanted a little sport did you?"

"It makes no difference what I want. This piece of work will make you lots of trouble. What right have you to tie me up this way?"

"All the right in the world, youngster. I'm first selectman of this township. The State has neglected it; but I haven't. I've incorporated it and organized a town government. Now it seems to us people here that you need looking after. You're a vagrant without visible means of support, and there are many things to indicate that you are loony," and Pete tapped his forehead with a significant grin.

It seemed that the capture of Ned had put the smuggler chief in a jocose frame of mind. He appeared to extract considerable amusement from his own efforts at wit.

"Do you know where I'm taking you?" he demanded abruptly.

"No."

"To the Letter K poor house. We'll keep you there till we decide what to do with you. It's evident that you are too dangerous a fellow to run at large. How many scalps did you ever lift?"

"It makes no difference what I've done. You'll see the day you'll rue this business."

"You ungrateful young scamp. Haven't you any sense o' gratitude? You came down here for sport, and now you don't appreciate my efforts to give it to you?"

"Do you mean to rob me?"

"Not at all sonny. To show you that I don't, we'll leave your gun and bundle o' dynamite right here in these firs. You can come back and get them, if the Council of State decides that you are all right."

"You'll find there isn't so much fun in this thing as you think."

"I guess not sonny. Where's the other fellow?"

"Byer?"

"Yes."

"Oh, he didn't come with us in here. He just drove us down and took the team home."

A satisfied grin stole over Pete's face and Ned was almost ready to cry with vexation. He saw that the wily old rascal had wormed out of him the very piece of information he was most anxious to secure. "Raymond," he reflected, "is probably a prisoner, and now that he's got me and knows there are but two of us he'll take precious good care that neither of us escapes."

"When youngsters of your age undertake to put me on my back you've bitten off considerably more than you can chew," said Pete, dropping his affected pleasantry, as he took a firmer grip upon Ned's collar and half lifted, half dragged him, towards the camp. "I shouldn't wonder if you wished you had stayed at home where you belong, before you get out of this scrape."

"If this doesn't mean a good deal of more trouble for you than it does for me, then I miss my guess, that's all," said Ned defiantly.

"Crow away, my little bantam. We'll clip your wings for you, so you can't fly very far."

"Well, who've you got there, now?" demanded Ike Wallace, as Pete dragged Ned in front of the camp.

"The boy that came down here with young Benson," said Pete with grim satisfaction. "Now we're all right, Ike. There were only two of them."

"It seems to me we're all wrong. You don't 'spose those boys' folks will let them stay here very long without hunting them up do you?"

"No, but it will be one thing to hunt for them and another to find them. Why, Ike, I'll bet there's been hundreds of people in that camp since we built the scoop and never a one outside of the gang suspected its existence."

"Look here, Pete," said Ike sharply, "if you think you're going to keep those boys here without being discovered when

dozens of men get to ransacking this vicinity and even this camp in search for them, you show poorer judgment than I want to hitch to. That's all I've got to say."

"Well, to begin with, they won't commence to hunt for them before a week."

"Why?"

"Look at this knapsack. Boys don't lug so much grub for one day's fun. The young cubs are altogether to lazy for that No, these boys are out for a week, and it will probably be ten days before their families begin to be worried about them. Before that the fellows will be here with the last load of collateral. Then we can close up business and get out for a while."

"You really see then that the jig is up."

"Of course it is now; but only for a short time. In a few weeks matters will get quieted down again. People will forget about it, and we can go on as before. All we've got to do is to hold on for a day or two more. We must see that the boys reach here all right with their stuff. It may be that we shall have to meet them and have them dump it somewhere else. It seems to me, though, that if we can have a clear coast it will be a good deal better to run it right through to the scoop. Then we can watch our chances for getting it out to the Corner or, if worst comes to worst, we can leave it right there till we commence operations again. Nobody would every discover it."

"That's so."

"One thing is certain, Ike, we must stand by the boys and see them safely through with the matter."

"Of course we must."

"If everything goes right we can close up operations and clear out for a while."

"What are you going to do with these youngsters?"

"I don't exactly know yet. I haven't decided," responded Pete, evasively. One thing is certain, though, I sha'n't do anything that will put us in a box. Depend on it, Ike, I will pull out of this business all right. I've done considerable of it and have never been trapped yet."

Ike brightened visibly at these words and apparently began to feel that the outlook was not altogether so hopeless as he had imagined.

"Open up the scoop," commanded Pete, and the order was obeyed with considerable more alacrity than had been shown in Raymond's case.

"Now, my young lark, I've a fine little cage for you here," said Pete, as he descended the ladder. "It is snug and tight, and your singing won't disturb the family in the least," and he chuckled loudly at his own wit.

"Is that you, father?" shouted Tom, as he caught the sound of his father's voice.

"Timenation! that's Tom!" exclaimed Pete, in bewildered amazement.

"Wha-what does this mean?" he gasped, as the light from Ike's lantern showed him his own son securely bound and laid out on the blankets where he had left Raymond. "How came you here?"

"Raymond Benson did it. I couldn't help it," whimpered Tom, who had a mortal terror of his father's anger.

"Well, how did you happen to be here, anyway?"

"Ike sent me down with some hard tack and water for Benson. When I got here he jumped on me and tied me. Then he went off with my hat and overcoat."

"I thought you had a hand in this," said Pete, turning

angrily to Ike. "A pretty mess you've made of things by your idiotic meddling. You were cut out for an old woman, you were."

"Well, I was going to the Corner tonight and I didn't want the boy to go without any supper."

Bah! You were awful considerate for that boy. Well, your blamed folly has dumped our fat into the fire. All is, if we don't catch that boy again, we're dished."

"It seems to me your boy was the considerate one," growled Ike. "If he hadn't been, he wouldn't have let a small boy like young Benson get the upper hands of him."

"How did that happen?" demanded Pete, turning fiercely upon Tom.

"Well, you see," was the whining response, "I never had an idea but what he was tied, so I wasn't prepared for any tussle with him. I bent over him to give him a drink of water, when all of a sudden he grabbed me by the hair and laid me out flat. I wasn't expecting it, and before I could gather myself he had a grip on my throat I couldn't shake off.

"How long has he been gone?"

"About two hours, I should think."

"Nonsense, said Ike, impatiently. "It wasn't more than half an hour ago you came down here."

"Well, it seems two hours."

"You don't appear to know anything since young Benson put you to sleep," said Ike, tartly. "Where do you suppose that young fellow went to?" he asked, turning to Pete.

"I suppose he's streaking it for home just as fast as he can go," was the reply. "Here, cut that boy loose." Ike reluctantly pulled out his knife and cut Tom's bonds. It was very evident that the young man was not a favorite of his. "What are you going to do?" he asked the father.

"I'm going to have that boy, and you are going to help me catch him,"

"We can't do that. He's a quarter way to the county road by this time."

"That makes no difference," responded Pete, energetically. "We'll have him if he is half way there. Even if he gets to the county road ahead of us, it will make no difference. He will still have five miles to go through the woods, My team is in the log hovel just above the branching off of the tote road, and we can easily overtake the boy with it, unless he should be given a lift by some team, which isn't very likely at this time of day. He'll be pretty well fagged by the time he gets out of the woods. It won't take us long to catch up with him. Perhaps we may overtake him before he gets to the county road. At any rate we'll make a pretty hard try for it."

"It would be an easy thing for him to take to the woods if he should see us overhauling him on the county road."

"Well, I'd like to see him escape from me if I get my eye on him again. I think I can make about as fast headway through the woods as he can."

"Well, what if some team should meet us carrying him back?"

"That thing won't happen. The minute I get my grippers on that boy I shall take to the woods with him."

"That will be the right thing to do."

"Of course it will. I don't intend to take any chances with that boy if I get hold of him."

"Do you suppose he's armed?"

"No, I secured his armory before we put him into the

scoop. I see he's taken his cartridge belt but that won't do him any good. The other boy had the gun. It's in the clump of firs now beyond the brook. I left it there with his pack when I collared him."

"I'm glad of that. If young Benson had a shooting iron in his hand, I for one should not want to be too free with him. You know by experience that he wouldn't hesitate to use it."

"The young upstart! Of course I know it. He's been the cause of all this set back. I guess now you begin to wish you hadn't been so chicken-hearted on his account. One thing is certain if I get hold of him again I'll give him the soundest thrashing he ever got in his life."

"Don't do anything foolish said Ike nervously, and it was evident that he was not a little worried at the situation.

During this conversation the party had come up from the scoop leaving Ned on the blankets below, and, while Ike was dropping the flooring into place, Pete seized the opportunity to address a few words of admonition to Tom.

"Look here, you young numskull," he said. "I want you to keep out of that scoop. If you should go down there, that youngster would be certain to change places with you. Here take this," he added, handing him the revolver he had secured from Raymond, "and keep close watch of things round here. If you ever allow yourself to get taken in again, by a boy smaller than you are, I'll try and pound some pluck into you. Understand that do you?"

"Yes."

"Well, see that you keep it in mind. Come on Ike." Pete led the way up the "tote" road at a dog trot and the two men were soon out of sight.

"I'm a good mind to go down and let Ned go, anyway." muttered Tom angrily, when he found himself alone. "I've no notion of being run over in this way. When they treat me like a dog, they'll not gain anything. It won't take them very long to discover that fact."

But the young fellow did not dare to put his revengeful thought into execution. He had a painful remembrance of sundry severe whippings that his father had given him, and was afraid to do anything that would so much provoke his anger. When he had satisfied himself that the two elder men had gone, he settled himself lazily back upon one of the bunks of the camp and was soon deeply absorbed in the exciting pages of a dime novel which he pulled from his pocket. This was a class of literature to which Tom was very partial and it had exercised the same demoralizing influence upon him that it does upon every boy who is foolish enough to read it.

Meanwhile Ned was alone with some harrowing reflections in the scoop. He had heard the flooring replaced above him with very much the same fellings that the sound had inspired in Raymond. "Well, this is a pretty fix," he muttered. "My gracious, I hope they won't catch Raymond. I think they'll be mistaken if they suppose he'll follow the "tote" road clear out to the county road. He's no fool. He has a little pocket compass and will have no trouble in quartering through the woods and striking the county road on the edge of the clearing. I don't believe they'd dare to trouble him there, for he would be too near houses. I suppose they took his gun and revolver away from him, If they didn't, I don't believe they could capture him, anyway. He isn't one of the kind to be taken as long as there is any fight left in him. If

he only succeeds in reaching the Corner, the people there will come down here in force and clear this place out."

It was a monotonous place. The air was heavy and oppressive. Ned made an attempt to reach the rope that bound his arms, but old Ike had learned wisdom from experience and had capped Pete's work by carefully tieing his bandanna handkerchief about the cords before leaving the scoop. "It's no use," thought Ned, discouraged at this discovery. "They have done their work well. I'd give five dollars to know how Raymond got away."

The time dragged painfully. The cords seemed to tighten their hold upon him. His arms became stiff and cramped from remaining in one fixed and unnatural position. Ned felt that home was a good ways off! that perhaps he and Raymond might ever be heard from again. The thought made him shiver. He had often threatened in his younger years to run away and go to sea. It had sometimes appeared to him that his father was unnecessarily stern in dealing with him. But now, he told himself that the little two-story farm house that nestled down on the hill-side was the dearest place . on earth, and that no boy had kinder parents than Ned Grover. He mentally resolved to be a better son to them, if he ever had a chance to try. With deep remorse he thought of the many times he had permitted his father to do things that he might just as well have done himself, how often he had gone hunting and fishing when the work on the farm was sadly in need of him, and how indignant he had grown on several occasions when his father had refused to let him off. "I've been too lazy to live," he muttered as he thought of these things.

Ned's father was one of the well to do farmers of Chest-

nut, and his mother, a busy, sweet-faced little woman, was one of it's most loved and respected ladies. Ned was their only child, and they had sometimes been accused of "humoring him to death" by some of the good spinsters of the town who were always ready to volunteer valuable suggestions to parents as to the proper way of training up children. Ned was not without his faults. He was wilful and impatient of restraint, and apt in moments of anger to do and say things which he afterwards deeply regretted. For all that his parents felt that they had many reasons to feel justly proud of him. He was a boy of excellent character, thoroughly truthful and honest. His evenings were spent at home, and he was never known to use profane or vulgar language. His father had laid up, by industry and economy, a handsome sum of money in the Bolton savings bank, with which he contemplated giving his son the advantages of a liberal education later on. Ned was indeed fortunate in his home, and it was no wonder that his thoughts went out to it with unwonted tenderness as he lay bound and helpless in the bottom of Pete Atkins's underground hiding place.

His reflections were interrupted by the sound of a bar inserted under the edge of the movable flooring above.

"The jig is up," he thought. "They've caught Raymond."

A moment later the flooring was thrown aside and Tom Atkins came slowly down the ladder, closely followed by Raymond Benson bearing a lantern on his arm and holding a revolver in his hand, ready to shoot at the first sign of treachery on the part of his prisoner.

CHAPTER XIX.

PETE ATKINS IN THE TOILS.

When Raymond Benson from his place of concealment in the horse hovel saw his friend Ned Grover securely bound and in the clutches of old Pete Atkins, he was overcome with He was unable to imagine how he had been captured. His first impulse was to seize his gun and go to his assistance, but fortunately his more sober second thought restrained him. He saw that his chances of capturing both Ike and Pete would be small, and that unless he were able to do this, any aggressive move on his part would be folly. It would only result in making him Ned's companion in the scoop, and would cut off all hope of escape for both. He wisely decided, therefore, that under the circumstances discretion would prove the better part of valor. He could accomplish vastly more by strategy than he possibly could by force. It occurred to him that when Pete and Ike discovered that he had escaped from the scoop, they would be considerably disturbed and would lose no time in searching for him. They would do this the more readily because they supposed him unarmed. He knew very well that Pete wouldn't look for him on the foot-path across the brook. He had just come from that direction and would think, no doubt, that if Raymond had been in that vicinity he would have been with Ned, or at least answered to his signal. "They'll think I went home," he reflected, "and will look for me along the tote road. Perhaps it would be better for me to find a hiding place in the thick woods to the left of the clearing. They'd scarcely think of looking for me there, and if they did, I could defend myself. I will also be in a good position to watch the camp, and if those old fellows leave the clearing, something will happen that will astonish them considerably when they get back. I'm in condition now to fight them on equal footing if worst comes to worst."

With this determination Raymond waited until he felt sure that Pete and Ike had descended into the scoop with their prisoner. Then making a quick dash across the clearing to the place of concealment he had selected, he forced his way through a growth of scrub cedars that fringed it, and threw himself behind a large hemlock, which had been blown down by the wind. "This will answer for a fort and hiding place, too," he thought. "I believe I could hold my own here with half a dozen men like Pete Atkins."

At the foot of the hemlock behind which Raymond had found such an excellent place of concealment, the large, gnarled roots had been half pulled from their bed of soggy earth. The moss and soil that still adhered to them formed a massive web of natural lattice. Through it were several small openings which Raymond found, to his delight, commanded a good view of the whole clearing. Scarcely had he taken his position at this post of observation, when Ike Wallace and old Pete Atkins emerged from the camp. It was evident from their actions that they were laboring under great excitement. Pete, after pausing a moment at the camp door to speak a few sharp words to someone within, started

up the tote road at a dog trot, and Ike rapidly followed him. In a few moments both men were out of sight and hearing.

"They have left Tom to guard Ned," thought Raymond, exultingly. "I'll bet his father stopped and warned him not to get caught again. My! but mus'n't he have felt cheap, though, when his father found him down in the scoop!"

Raymond chuckled merrily at the thought of Tom's chagrin and discomfiture. When he felt sure that Pete and Ike were out of hearing, he left his hiding place and stole softly across the clearing. Making his way to the rear of the camp, he crawled quietly upon the earth embankment and looked in through the window. The sight within showed him that his extra precaution had been needless. Curled comfortably up on the blankets of one of the bunks was Tom Atkins, completely absorbed in the exciting pages of the flashy novel he was reading. The fire in the center of the camp had burned low, but he was entirely oblivious of the fact.

"I'll bet a cannon shot wouldn't rouse him," thought Raymond. "Well, one can't expect much else than weeds to grow in a mind seeded with that literature. I suppose that shallow-pated fellow, who hasn't courage enough to face an intelligent sheep, thinks he would be able to achieve enduring fame as an Indian killer and scalp lifter. Perhaps he imagines himself a bold pirate or a highway robber. Such fellows are usually the heroes of those stories. I really believe though, that one square look at a real wild Indian, or a single sniff of genuine gun powder, would scare him into fits. It's an awful easy thing to kill Indians and play the desperado on paper. I suppose Tom does up a dozen or two men in his mind every time he reads that bosh. A fellow who gets hitched on to that kind of reading loses all taste for the

works of good writers. It is the worse kind of mental poison and I believe the publication of it ought to be prohibited by law."

With these reflection, Raymond made his way to the door of the camp. Carefully lifting the latch, he swung the door open a little way and entered the camp, softly closing it again behind him. Then stepping in front of Tom's bunk he pointed his gun at the young fellow's head and shouted sternly:

"You are my prisoner! Surrender."

With a wild start Tom dropped his book and gazed at Raymond like one awakened from a dream. Terror and amazement were depicted in every line of his face. Raymond's revolver lay on the bunk beside him, but he made no effort to reach for it.

"H—how did you come here?" he gasped.

"On my legs," answered Raymond coolly. "Climb out of that bunk," he added peremptorily.

Tom lost no time in obeying this order.

"Now light that lantern," commanded Raymond, as he stepped to the bunk and took possession of the revolver.

"What for?"

"It makes no difference. I advise you to do as I tell you, and be quick about it."

Tom sullenly did as he was directed, at the same time starting toward the scoop.

"Hold on," said Raymond. "I guess I'll take charge of the glim," and he took the lantern from Tom's hand and hung it upon his own arm. He saw that the rumseller's son was in a desperate mood, and did not intend to leave him any loophole for escape. At Raymond's command Tom threw off the

flooring that covered the scoop and descended the ladder, Raymond following him closely with the lantern and revolver.

"Well, where in the world did you drop from?" exclaimed Ned joyfully, as he recognized his friend. "I began to think that both of us would end our days in this hole. I tell you old fellow, your face right here at this time is about the most cheerful sight that I have ever seen. I was beginning to get terribly down at the mouth.

"I know all about it. I've been here myself."

"Well, I don't want any more of it."

"You and I are on top of the heap. We have the inside track. Here, take your knife and cut his ropes," he added to Tom.

The order was tremblingly obeyed.

"Now, Ned, just tie him up. Get down on the blanket," he added. addressing the rumseller's son.

"See here," whimpered Tom, "you're not going to leave me here again, are you?" It was evident that his former experience in the place had given him a wholesome horror of it.

"Well, that's about the size of it," responded Raymond.

"Please don't do that," pleaded Tom. "I'll do anything you say if you won't put me down here. You don't want him to do it, do you?" he added appealingly to Ned.

"I've nothing to say about it," was the response. "But I don't see as it's any worse for you down here than it has been for me."

"Down with you," said Raymond, sharply. "We've no time to fool with you. If matters go as I hope, I'll promise that you sha'n't have long to stay here."

With a very poor grace Tom submitted to the inevitable

and was soon securely bound and laid away under the blanket.

"Now what?' asked Ned when he and Raymond stood in the camp, after carefully replacing the flooring over the scoop.

"The next thing is to get Pete."

"Don't we want Ike, too?"

"Yes, but I don't believe we shall have a chance to get him."

"Why not?"

"In my opinion the old fellow won't show up in this section again right away. This afternoon's proceedings have rattled him badly."

"Perhaps Pete won't come back."

"Don't have any fear of that. He will return for Tom, if for nothing more. I think myself, though, that the old fellow sees that he is nearly at the end of his rope."

"We don't want to run any risks with him."

"Of course not."

"How shall we drop on him? He is as wiry as a cat, and won't give up if he can help it without a desperate fight."

"My idea is this. He will be sure to go to the scoop, about the first thing when he comes back. You and I can watch for him through the window on the back of the camp and drop on him about the time he is lifting that flooring."

"Don't you suppose he'll show fight?"

"He won't dare to if we cover him with the revolver and shot gun."

"Perhaps he'll think that we wouldn't dare to shoot."

"No, he won't. After the experience he has had with me he will know better than that.

"But what if he should leave the tote road and follow the brook bed down to the camp?"

"Well, even if he did, we should be able to hear him before he could see us and get round on the side of the camp. We should be out of sight there."

"You're right, old fellow. Your head is longer than mine. Did you notice how Pete was armed?"

"Yes, he had his Winchester rifle and Ike had a shot gun. I think, too, that Pete must have had my clasp knife."

"How shall we divide our armory?"

"You may take the shot gun and I'll keep the revolver. If we drop on old Pete I will cover him and you may tie him."

"I declare, we couldn't possibly find a better place to watch from than this," said Ned, when he and Raymond had taken their positions behind the camp. "How did you find it?"

"I was here and got the lay of the land before I captured Tom."

The place was indeed most admirably adapted to the plans of the boys. That end of the camp, on account of its exposed position, had been given a broad embankment of earth that came almost up to the window. On this the boys were able to lie and get an excellent view of the camp. They were thus able to secure at the same time, without fear of discovery, a fine view of the clearing and of the interior of the camp.

"I'm afraid we shall be dished, Raymond," said Ned, when they had taken their positions.

"Why?"

"If old Pete goes clear out to the county road, it will be long after dark when he gets back."

"But he won't go to the county road."

"Why?"

"If he doesn't find any trace of me on the "tote" road in the first mile or two, he will hurry back here to try and discover my trail before dark. Ike will probably push on to the county road, and you may be sure he will never show up here again, though he won't be fool enough to let Pete suspect it.

"I believe you're right, old fellow."

"I am confident of it."

"It would be a bad thing for him if old Pete should run across him again, after having been left in the lurch."

"You may rest assured that if Ike clears out, he will take precious good care that Pete never sees him again. He's shrewd enough for that."

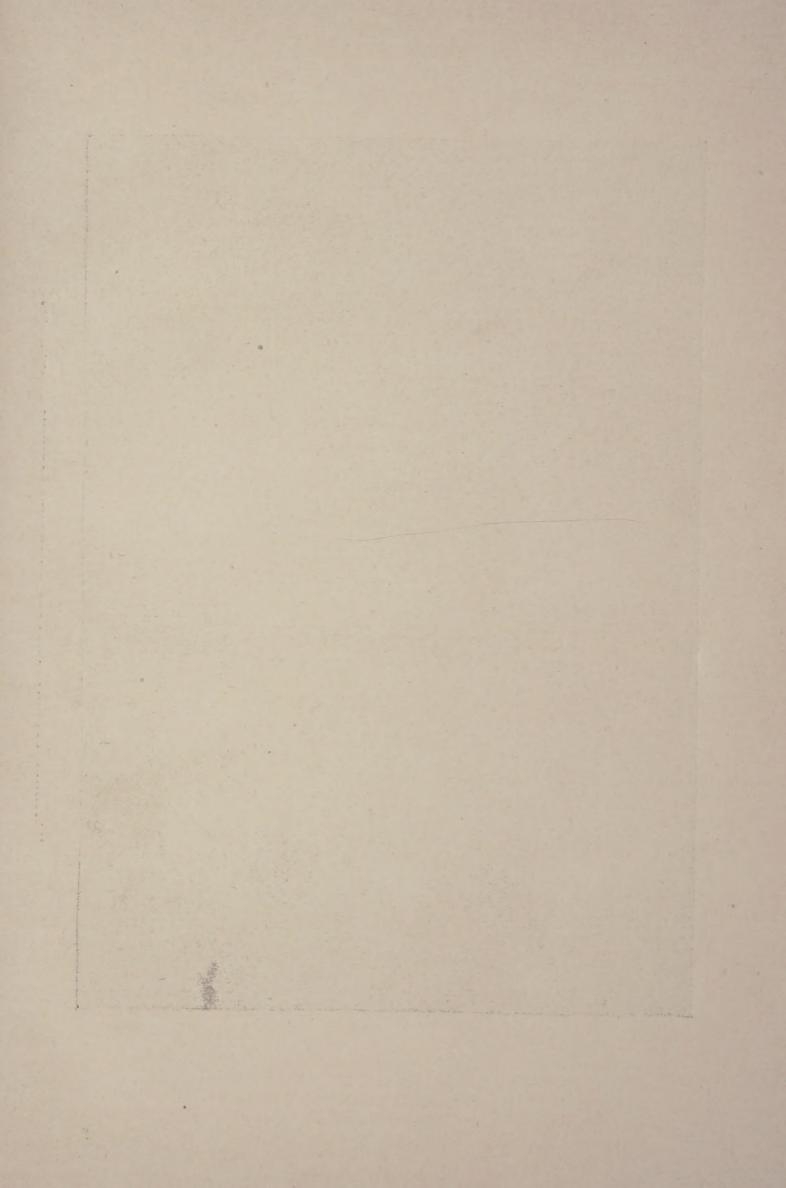
"I guess that's so. The old fellow is brighter than he looks to be. Hark! What's that?"

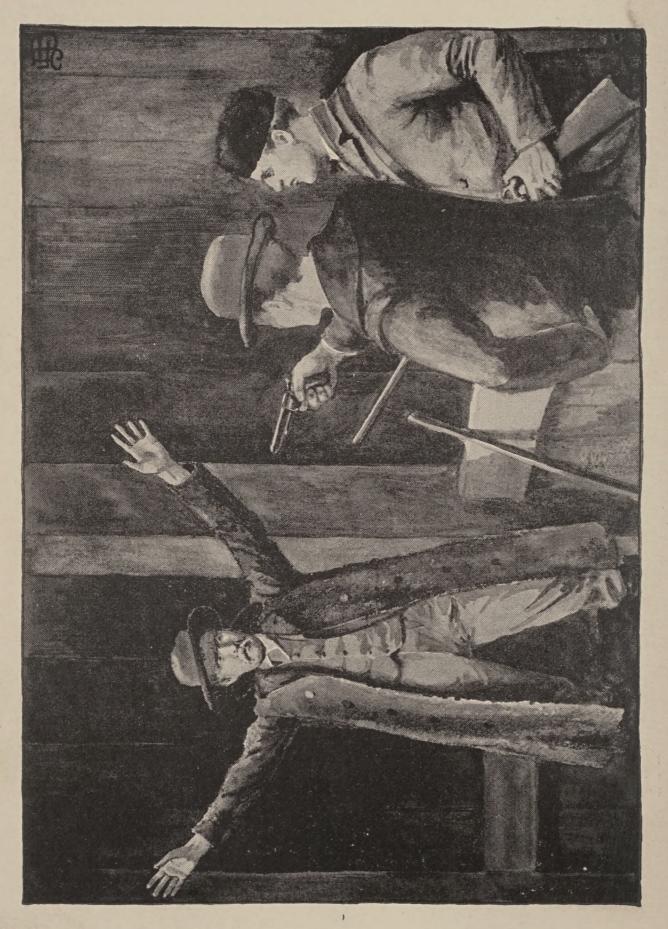
The boys listened with bated breath. Down the "tote" road came the quick tread of a man. Peering cautiously around the corner of the camp, Raymond saw Pete Atkins come into the clearing at an even faster pace than he had left it. The old fellow was very evidently in a savage frame of mind, and there was an energy about his movements that told the boys he would be an ugly customer to handle. With long strides he made his way into the camp, where he stopped short in amazement and surprise. It was evident that he was terribly disconcerted at Tom's absence. He went to the door of the camp and took a careful look about the clearing, following it up with a visit to the horse hovel. He returned, evidently satisfied that there was no one about the place.

"My soul! I shouldn't want to be in Tom's place if Pete should get his hands on him," whispered Ned.

"Sh-h," was Raymond's warning response. "He won't do it. Come on."

The boys saw that the time for action had arrived. Old Pete had leaned his gun in one corner of the camp, lighted the lantern and started for the iron bar which leaned against the door where Raymond had purposely left it. Taking this, he inserted the point under the edge of the flooring above the scoop. Before he could lift it, however, he was startled by a sound behind him, and turning quickly found himself covered by a revolver and shot gun in the hands of Raymond Benson and Ned Grover.





". Hands up, sir!' shouted Raymond, sternly" (Page 287)

CHAPTER XX.

JOEL WEBBER IS GIVEN A SURPRISE.

"Hands up, sir!" shouted Raymond, sternly, as the discomfited smuggler turned upon them. "You are our prisoner. If you attempt to resist us, your life won't be worth a moment's purchase."

There was something in the tone of this command that convinced Pete that it would be wise to obey it. He saw plainly that his captors were not to be trifled with.

"What do you want of me?" he demanded, savagely.

"You'll find out pretty quick," said Ned, coolly.

"You have your innings now. Mine will come later on," growled the smuggler chief as he complied with Raymond's order.

"Perhaps they may, but I have serious doubts of it. I think the game is played for you. Just run through his pockets, Ned, and see what you can find there."

Ned did as he was directed, but the only weapon he discovered was the clasp knife which Pete had taken from Raymond.

"Now cross your hands behind you," commanded Raymond, when Ned had completed his search.

"What for?"

"You'll see soon enough."

"Well, I sha'n't do anything of the kind."

"Either you'll put your hands behind you, and be quick about it, or I'll drop you in your tracks. After the experience I've had with you I'm in no mood for fooling," said Raymond, sharply.

With a savage oath Pete did as he was directed. His face was fairly livid with rage and chagrin, and nothing but the firm conviction that such a course would mean instant death to him prevented him from springing at the throats of his captors.

When Ned had carefully bound his arms with many coils of the shingle rope, and crowned the work with Ike Wallace's bandanna handkerchief, the flooring was lifted and Raymond gave the order to march. Slowly and carefully Pete made his way down the short ladder, to the unspeakable astonishment and disappointment of Tom, who had never dreamed of seeing his father in such a plight. He had heard the flooring removed in the full expectation that his father had returned and was about to release him. He had never doubted for a moment that Raymond and Ned had made for home with all possible speed upon leaving the scoop. The situation was not without its recompense for Tom, however. He was even a greater coward physically than morally, and had felt with fear and trembling that his father would give him a terrible thrashing when he again found him in the same predicament as when Ned was brought into the scoop. With the boys he felt safe from corporal punishment, and in this thought he found a solace for his confinement. His father might not be very sociable but he would be company, and that was considerable in the darkness of the scoop.

"Well, Tom," said Raymond, as he flashed the lantern into his face, we've brought you a bed-fellow."

"Yes," said Pete savagely, "if it hadn't been for your snivelling idiocy, things might have gone the other way."

"Hold on, Mr. Atkins," said Ned, "it wont help the situation in the least to belabor your son."

"I couldn't help it," whined Tom. "He took me by surprise."

"Yes, no doubt of it," said Pete sarcastically. "You are one of those sleepy fellows who are always getting surprised."

"It seems to me that he isn't the only one in the family that has that failing," said Raymond impatiently. "Climb down on that blanket, Mr. Atkins."

Pete sullenly took his place by the side of Tom and Ned soon saw that his legs were as securely bound as his arms.

"Now," said Raymond, as he surveyed his prisoners with evident satisfaction, "we shall be obliged to leave you here for a while. It's an uncomfortable position for you, I know, but I don't see how we can very well avoid it. We shall get you into other quarters at Bolton, though, before long."

With these words, Raymond and Ned returned up the ladder into the camp. When they had replaced the flooring above the scoop and replenished the fire which had nearly died out, they sat down upon the deacon seat before its cheerful blaze to plan how they should get their prisoners to the Corner. Now that they had them safely secured, they began to feel that Pete and his son were white elephants on their hands.

"I don't see but what we've got to stay here all night,',

said Ned. "It will be two days before Byer comes after us with the team and it's altogether too much to think of making the Corner tonight without one. I'm certainly too tired to walk that far, even if we could have daylight for it."

"You are right, Ned," assented Raymond. "It's five o'clock now and would be pitch dark before we could cover half of the ten miles to the county road. Then there would be eight miles more to the Corner. I agree with you. We had better stay right here tonight and start at daybreak in the morning."

"But what if Ike Wallace or some others of the gang should walk in on us?"

"I don't have much fear of that. There isn't any doubt in my mind but what Ike has cleared out. I don't believe he will be seen in these parts again for a long time, perhaps never."

"I don't think any of the gang will trouble us, either," said Ned, brightly, as a sudden thought came to him. "I heard Pete tell Ike Wallace when they were starting out to look for you, that we undoubtedly came prepared to stay a week, and that it would probably be ten days before our folks got worried enough about us to hunt for us. He said that before that time the boys would be back with the last load of collateral, and the business would be dropped for a while, till the storm blew over."

"Well, if that's the case, there probably won't be any of the gang about here for five or six days," said Raymond.

"There's another thing," said Ned. "Pete also spoke of having a team in the old log hovel on the county road near the place where the tote road branches off. I had nearly forgotten that."

"Well, you may make up your mind that it didn't slip Ike Wallace's memory," answered Raymond. "If Pete had a team there, you may feel pretty certain that Ike is well on his way to Canada by this time. You don't lose that old coon very easily."

"That's so. He knows how to take care of himself. Let's go down in the firs and get my gun and haversack."

"Don't you suppose Pete has taken them?"

"No. He hasn't had time. He had all he wanted to do to take care of me, so he left my things where he found me. No doubt he intended to go after them later, but when he got into the scoop and found you were gone, he lost no time in getting after you. I don't doubt but what we shall find things in the firs just as he left them."

"Well, we will go after them together. We must hurry about it though. It won't do to leave the camp unguarded long."

The boys hurried across the brook, and along the narrow path to the firs, where, sure enough, as Ned had predicted, the gun and haversack were found just where Pete had left them. Raymond and Ned returned to the camp in triumph with them.

"It looks to me as if our victory were about as complete as it possibly could be," said Ned when they sat together again upon the deacon seat."

"I don't know what is lacking," responded Raymond.

The conversation of the boys was interrupted by the sound of a quick step in the clearing.

"I believe that's Ike Wallace," said Ned, reaching for his shot gun.

"No, it isn't," said Raymond. "Old Ike hasn't stepped in that brisk, vigorous way for years."

"Perhaps it's one of the gang."

"Perhaps so, but we shall hardly be fools enough to sit here with a revolver and shot gun in our hands and let one man take us prisoners. He won't be expecting to see us and it will be an easy matter to get the drop on him."

"We don't want to be too hasty."

"No, we will have the advantage. The surprise will be on the other side."

The step drew nearer, the door was thrown open, and a big, broad-shouldered young man stepped into the camp. Raymond and Ned at once covered him with their weapons, but immediately lowered them in astonishment and chagrin, when, to their great joy, they recognized the round, good-natured face of Joel Webber.

"Put down your shooters, boys," said the big fellow with a comical grin. "I surrender, and you may have every blessed thing in that pack I just brought across the line."

Raymond and Ned gave one long look to make sure that their eyes had not deceived them and then rushing forward, seized both of Joel's hands and gave them such a shaking as left no doubt of the cordiality of their welcome.

"How in the world did you come here?" they asked in chorus.

"Easy, easy, boys. Give me a little chance to catch my breath," laughed the big fellow, as he seated himself on the deacon seat and stretched out his hands to the cheerful blaze of the fire.

"I give myself up."

"Well, we'll, take good care of you," said Ned warmly.

"I should almost surmise from my reception that you were not expecting me. Didn't get my telegram, did you?" "I believe you'd joke at a funeral, Joel," laughed Raymond.

"Well, that would depend a good deal on whose funeral it was. You boys, if I remember correctly, laughed pretty heartily at what came very near being mine," he added with a good natured grimace.

"You couldn't blame us for that old fellow," said Ned. "You would have laughed yourself if you could have seen how you looked when that bear knocked you into the underbrush."

"Oh, I never blamed you boys. I was only too glad to do something to amuse you. I'm a generous sort of a soul anyway; always ready to make a martyr of myself upon the alter of hilarity. I went out into that second growth on my way down here and had a good laugh all to myself, just from thinking how comical that bear must have looked."

"That's an unselfish way of putting it," laughed Raymond. But, old fellow, I'm glad to see you. Your appearance at this particular time seems almost providential."

"If you'd been old cloven foot himself, it wouldn't have astonished us a bit more, added Ned.

"Well, I guess we're not very far from the favorite resort of one of his imps," responded Joel.

"I guess not, too," said Raymond. "But you haven't told us what brought you here."

"Well, I had an idea that you was turning some scheme in your mind when I saw you reading the reward notice in the Post Office the other day. I went up to Bettycook Lake fishing day before yesterday and didn't return till this morning. On my way back I met Byer Ames, who told me that he had driven you two young hoodlums down to Letter K. It didn't take me long to smell a good sized rat. I hurried home and did some chores about the house. Then I har-

nessed the old gray mare into the beach wagon and here I am. I kinder thought by the way you fellows started out on me that you'd turned buccaneers, but I've partially changed my mind since. In fact, I almost dare to believe that you are glad to see me."

"You know we are, you old rat," said Ned.

"Well, I see you haven't captured Old Pete yet," continued Joel, glancing about the camp.

"That's where you're mistaken," said Raymond.

"Of course you have," laughed Joel, and got him stowed away in that pack probably," he added, pointing at Ned's haversack."

"You think we are joking, do you?"

"No, indeed," said Joel, with mock solemnity. "You two boys never joke any. Dud Rich will swear to that."

"We are not joking this time. We have told you the truth," said Raymond, with an earnestness that left Joel no doubt of his sincerity.

The big, good-natured fellow could scarcely credit his senses. His bantering tone left him.

"Wha-what?" he ejaculated, in genuine amazement.

"I mean just what I say. We have captured Pete Atkins and have him thoroughly bound and safely stowed away. What's more, we have evidence enough against him to convict him twice over."

"You're not joking, are you, boys?" persisted Joel, incredulously.

"Not a bit of it. We never were more serious in our lives," said Ned.

"Well, I swan!" ejaculated the big fellow. "That beats all I ever heard of. Where is he?"

Without a word Raymond rose, and taking the iron bar from the bunk, lifted the flooring from its place.

"Well I snum to gracious!" exclaimed Joel, as he peered down into the depths of the scoop. "What infernal lunk-heads some of us have been! Why, boys, it wasn't more than six weeks ago that Cobe Hersom and I were down here fishing and slept all night exactly over that hole. I vow we deserved to be kicked to death by mosquitoes."

"Not so bad as that, old fellow," responded Raymond, "It isn't at all surprising that so skilful an arrangement as that should have escaped detection. No one would think of looking here for anything of the sort."

"Well, perhaps not," admitted Joel, "but I can't help feeling a little cheap, all the same, to think that my nose was so near this discovery and didn't succeed in smelling it out. Let's take a look at the inside of the pit."

The three accordingly descended the ladder. Joel's amazement was only deepened when he saw the nature of the hiding place by which the Chestnut rumseller had been able so long to escape detection in his smuggling operations.

"The very boldness of this thing has been all that's saved it," he declared; then, lantern in hand, he walked along and took a good look at Pete and Tom.

"Well, you're a couple of chromos," was his comment.

"Yes, you can well afford to insult a man when he can't defend himself," sneered Pete. "There are times when some people are mighty brave."

"Well, I never discovered anything very alarming about you," said Joel. "You never have been the one to fight man fashion. You'd a good deal rather sneak round in the night and burn a man's barn or stab his horse. Oh, you're a very

brave fellow, you are. There's a government job waiting for you."

"Don't be too sure of that. You haven't got through with me vet."

"Well, we shall lose no time in doing so. You are like a rotten egg—the sooner rid of the better. Cut the ropes from their legs, boys."

"What for?" asked Raymond in surprise.

"Because we're going to start for home."

"But it will be dark in an hour."

"Well, what of that? We have a lantern and it will be smooth sailing after we get to the county road. I think we ought to reach the Corner by nine o'clock. I'm willing to do just as you say, boys, but I believe that the sooner we get these fellows to the jail at Bolton, the better it will be."

After a moment's reflection, the boys decided that Joel was right, The ropes that bound the legs of Pete and Tom were cut, and they were taken up into the camp. Here they were both tied to a long rope, the end of which Joel wound about his waist, laughingly declaring that the prisoners would find him a good anchor in case they should attempt to get away. Raymond and Ned with their guns on their shoulders headed the procession, the former carrying the lantern. spite of all their efforts to make good time, the trip was a slow and tedious one, and it was eight o'clock when they finally reached the county road. After this, as Joel had predicted, their progress was easy. Pete and Tom Atkins were given a place on the wide front seat and Joel sat between them and drove. Raymond and Ned sat on the back seat with their guns in readiness to shoot should the prisoners make any attempt to escape. It was half past nine when

the party pulled up in front of Squire Copeland's store. The loafers had nearly all gone home, but the few who remained were treated to a sensation that furnished the theme for their conversation for many a day after.

Pete Atkins suddenly became invested with an extraordinary interest, and, although his face had for years been a familiar one in Chestnut, he was gazed upon by the eager group of his fellow-townsmen that crowded around the wagon, very much as they would have viewed the royal Bengal tiger at a circus.

If he had any friends in the group they did not announce themselves. Everyone seemed anxious that Pete should not by any possibility make his escape.

A number of men volunteered to stand guard over him and Tom that night at the Town Hall, and Joel, who had vowed never to sleep until he saw the doors of the Bolton jail close upon them, accepted the services of half a dozen of them, as he afterwards declared, more for company than anything else.

Squire Copeland insisted that Raymond and Ned should remain all night at his house, and the invitation was thankfully accepted. For a long time they laid awake and talked over their exciting adventures in Letter K which had ended so triumphantly in the capture of the smuggler chief. It was past twelve o'clock when they finally fell asleep, the two happiest boys in Chestnut.

CHAPTER XXI.

CONCLUSION.

VERY little remains to be told. The news of Pete Atkins's capture spread like wildfire through the town. Raymond and Ned were the heroes of the hour. Their praises were in everybody's mouth. Those who had been the most eager to condemn the former as a bad boy when he left the Free High School were now among the foremost in extolling him, and many who had thought Ned a "spoiled boy" discovered that they had always known that he had the "right stuff in him."

Among all the congratulations tendered Raymond, there was none that affected him more deeply than grandfather Benson's hearty "God bless you, my boy. You have done well."

The day following their capture Pete Atkins and his son were taken to Bolton and lodged in jail. Simon Dart's store was thoroughly searched, and the result showed that there was scarcely any kind of merchandise on which a profit could be made by evading the custom laws, in which the crafty fellow had not dealt. The capacious cellar of his store had been extended far back into the hill and was packed full of a general variety of smuggled goods. Prominent among its contents were a number of barrels of various kinds of liquor. Here it was evident had been the place where Pete Atkins had long

stored up the intoxicants that had been such a curse to the good town of Chestnut.

At the preliminary hearing of the rumseller and his son, Tom was sentenced to the reform school during his minority, there being no proof that he was personally connected with the smuggling operations of his father. Pete, however, was handed over to the Federal authorities. He was taken to Portland and tried before the United States Circuit Court at that place. Raymond and Ned were summoned to the city as witnesses. They were not called upon to testify, however. Pete pleaded guilty to the charge of smuggling, and although every effort was made by his counsel to secure a light sentence, he was given a long term of imprisonment. His family shortly after removed to another state, and the town of Chestnut became well rid of its worst plague spot.

Simon Dart endeavored to make his way to California, but forgot that electricity travels faster than steam. He was arrested in Chicago, being recognized from a description sent out by the Associated Press. When he finally came up for trial before the Circuit Court at Portland, he was given the same sentence that had been meted out to Pete, and was sent to bear him company. Ike Wallace escaped safely into Canada and was never heard from after. For more than a week close watch was kept upon the Dole camp, but none of the Atkins gang showed up there. They had evidently taken the alarm and left the county. But the smuggling business was dead in the town of Chestnut, nor has it ever been revived since.

Raymond and Ned had a very pleasant time in Portland, going where they pleased and amusing themselves as they thought best. Upon their return home the reward of a

hundred dollars which had been offered for the arrest and conviction of the smugglers was paid to them. They insisted on sharing it with Joel Webber, but he absolutely refused to take a cent of it. He declared that ail the credit for the capture of Pete and the breaking up of the gang belonged to them, and they alone should have the benefits that came from it. The people of Cnestnut, however, were not willing that Joel should go unrewarded for his share in the good work. A subscription paper was passed round, and the following Christmas he was presented with a fine buffalo overcoat, a recognition that affected the big, good-hearted fellow deeply.

It was about a week after the stirring events narrated in the foregoing chapters that Ned Grover came enthusiastically upon Raymond as he was cutting sap troughs in front of his camp. "You might as well give up that work, old fellow," he exclaimed. "You'll have no use for those."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Raymond in surprise.

"I've some great news to tell you. Your grandfather and my father have put their heads together, and have decided to let you and me go to the Krampton Academy. That was the place, you know, where your cousin, Dave Weston, thought of going before he made up his mind to enter the Bowdoin Medical School. Father has written the principal of the academy, and has made arrangements to have us room in the large dormitory and take our meals at the Academy club. I have the catalogue of the institution at home, and there were two hundred and forty students there last term. Just think of that, old fellow."

Raymond had listened excitedly to this unexpected informa-

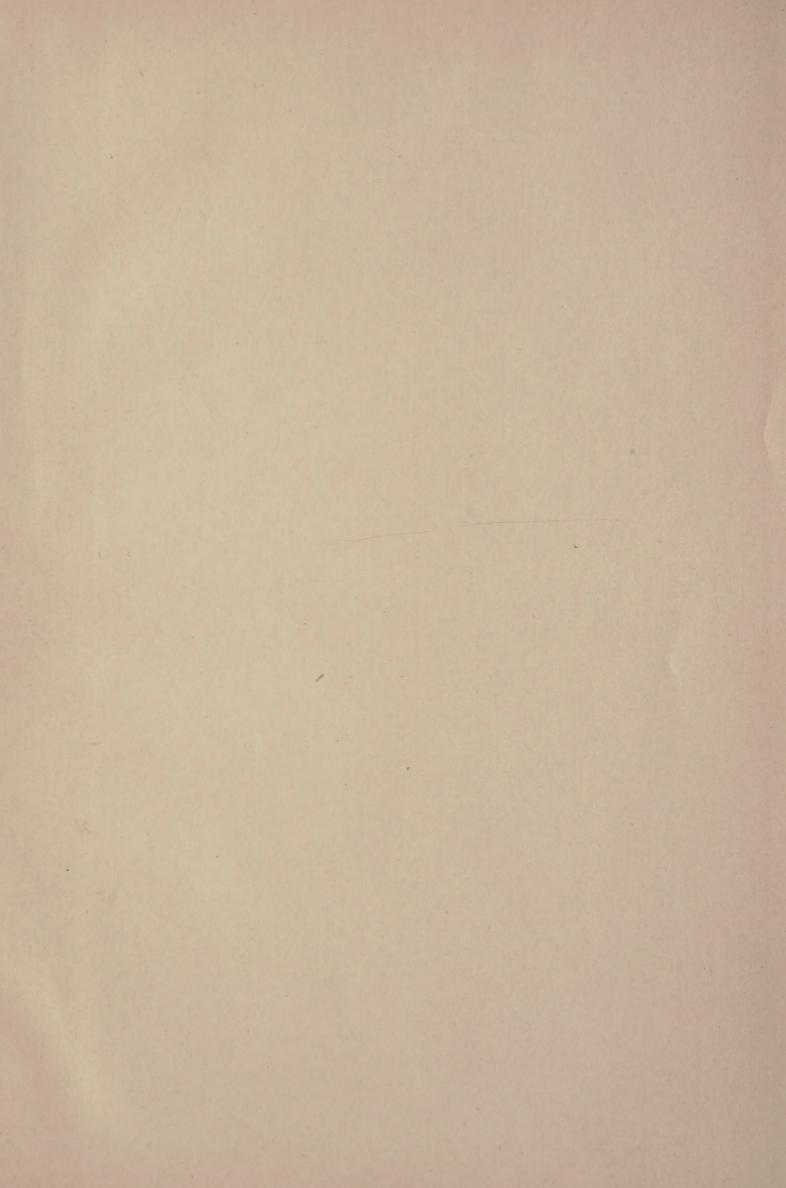
tion, and at the close of Ned's remarks gave expression to his feelings in an enthusiastic cheer. It had long been his ambition to go away from home to school and he was overjoyed at this promise for the fulfilment of his desires. He mentally resolved to give such a good account of himself that grandfather Benson would rever have occasion to regret having sent him to that institution.

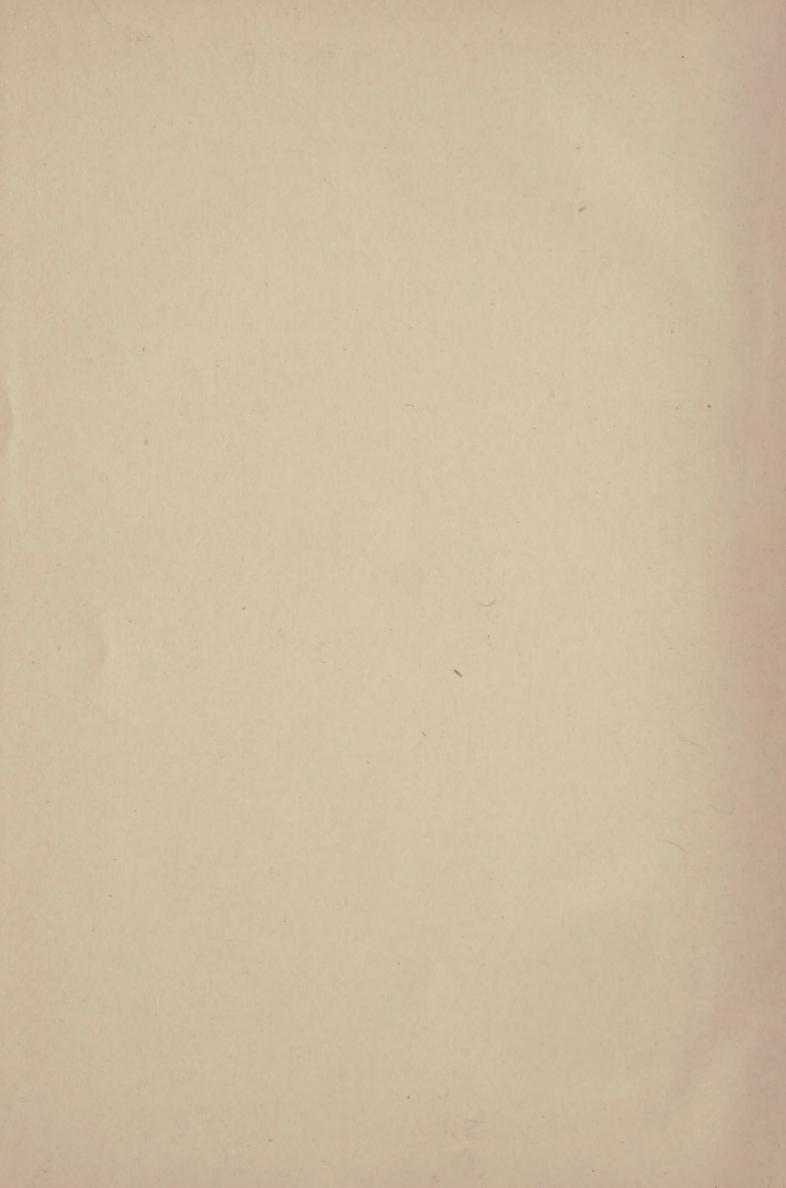
That afternoon Raymond and Ned visited the birch ridge on grandfather Benson's back lot with their shot guns, but their minds were more intent on plans for the future than upon hunting, and they returned home with few partridges.

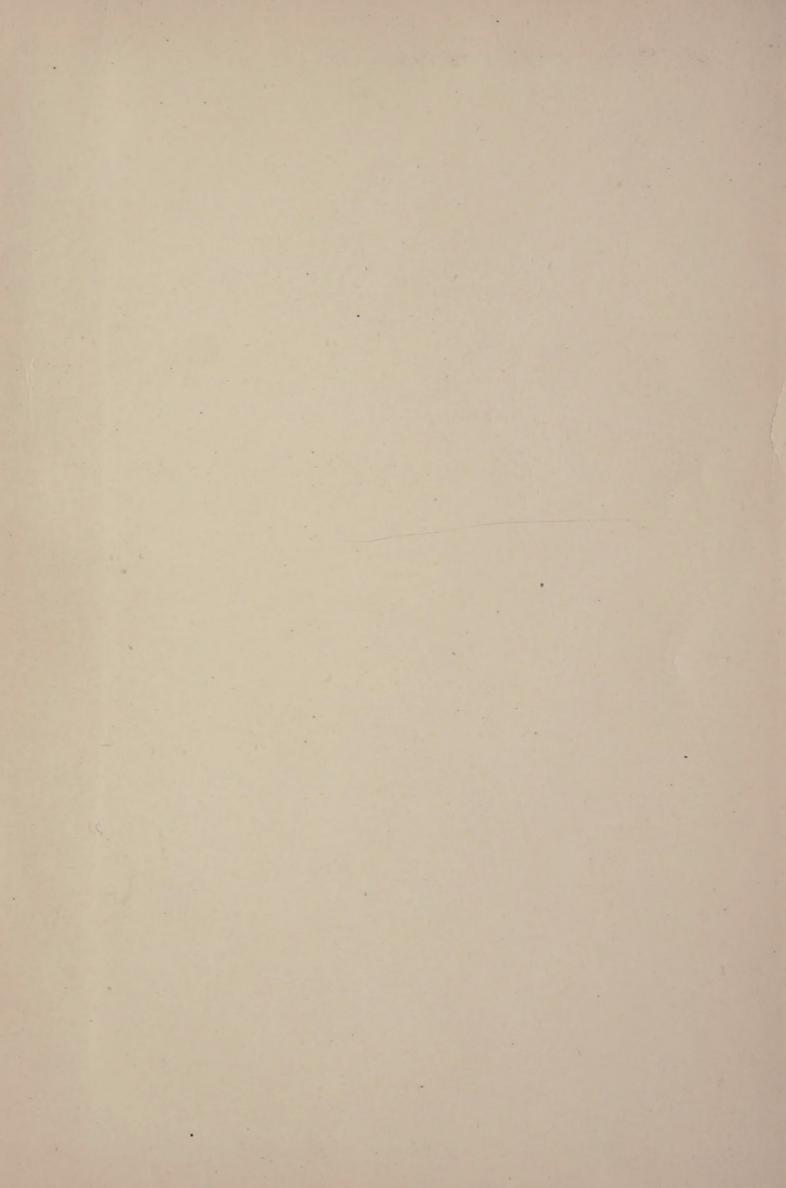
That night there was a tremor in grandfather Benson's voice as he conducted the family prayers, and Raymond thought he saw a tear glisten under his grandmother's spectacles when she kissed him good night.

For the first time he realized what a sacrifice they had made for him, to take up their lonely life again that he might be given advantages to fit him better for the work of after years. He knew how much they would miss him, and how earnestly their prayers would go out for him. He almost reproached himself for consenting to leave them, and when he finally fell asleep it was with a better understanding than ever before of how near and dear to him were the good couple down stairs.

In due season Raymond and Ned went away to school, but I have not space to tell of their experiences at Krampton Academy. What befell them there will very properly form the subject matter of a future volume entitled "Krampton Academy Life, or Raymond Benson's Fit for College."











LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

00014813317